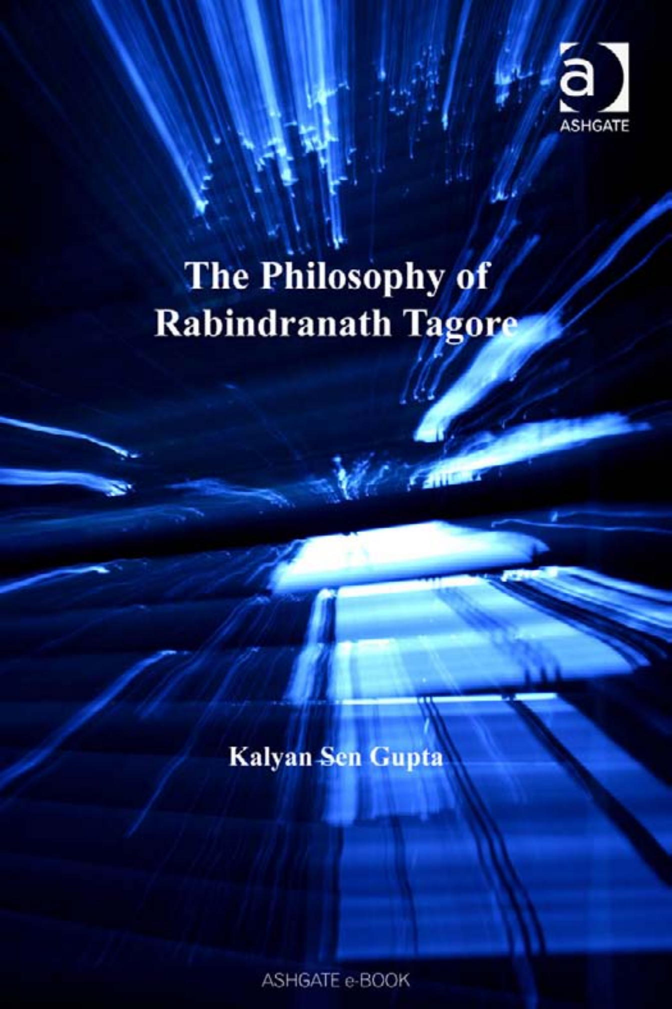


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The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore

Kalyan Sen Gupta

ASHGATE e-BOOK

THE PHILOSOPHY OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The Nobel Prize winner, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) – 'the Indian Goethe', as Albert Schweitzer called him – was not only the foremost poet and playwright of modern India, but one of its most profound and influential thinkers.

Kalyan Sen Gupta's book is the first comprehensive introduction to Tagore's philosophical, socio-political and religious thinking. Drawing on Rabindranath's poetry as well as his essays, and against the background theme of his deep sensitivity to the holistic character of human life and the natural world, Sen Gupta explores the wide range of Tagore's thought. His idea of spirituality, his reflections on the significance of death, his educational innovations and his relationship to his great contemporary, Gandhi, are among the topics that Sen Gupta discusses – as are Tagore's views on marriage, his distinctive understanding of Hinduism, and his prescient concerns for the natural environment. The author does not disguise the tensions to be found in Tagore's writings, but endorses the great poet's own conviction that these are tensions resolvable at the level of a creative life, if not at that of abstract thought.

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The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore

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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire, GU11 3HR
England

Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington, VT 05401-4405
USA

Ashgate website: http://www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Gupta, Kalyan Sen, 1936–
The philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore. – (Ashgate world philosophies series)
1. Tagore, Rabindranath, 1861–1941
I. Title
181.4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Gupta, Kalyan Sen.
The philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore / Kalyan Sen Gupta.
p. cm.—(Ashgate world philosophies series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7546-3036-6 (alk. paper)
1. Tagore, Rabindranath, 1861–1941—Philosophy. 2. Tagore, Rabindranath, 1861–1941—Political and social views. 3. Tagore, Rabindranath, 1861–1941—Knowledge—Arts. 4. Philosophers—India—Bengal—Biography. I. Title. II. Series.

PK1727.P45G87 2004
891.4'414—dc22

2004005415

ISBN 0 7546 3036 6

Typeset in Times Roman by N[2]productions.
Printed by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall.

To My Parents

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Preface

Tagore's writings have inspired such an extensive secondary literature that yet another book on him may seem redundant. In this volume, however, I hope to have discussed aspects of Tagore's thought in a way that does not merely reiterate previous studies but will also provoke a fresh interest in his thought among a new generation of his readers. What the book emphasizes above all is Tagore's conception of people's harmony both with humanity as a whole and with nature. For Tagore, this is an aesthetic condition that explains why he refers to his own religious perspective as a poet's religion or the religion of an artist. I argue that Tagore's notion of harmony is the central one in his thinking, around which the other concepts that he discusses revolve. The chapters of the book accordingly examine the ideal of spiritual harmony, interpersonal human solidarity, kinship with nature, and self-integrity through artistic creativity. I also address the question, one that taxed Tagore himself, of how the possibility and ideal of harmony may be defended in the face of the palpable disharmony and evil that characterize the actual world.

I am grateful to Professor David E. Cooper – a friend as well as an editor of the series in which this volume is published – whose detailed comments and suggestions have helped me improve this book and who, indeed, has carefully edited the whole text. I am also indebted to my wife Ananya Sen Gupta, who herself wrote a PhD thesis on Tagore, for providing me with important material on Tagore and for encouraging me in my work. I should also like to thank my daughter Kanya, who was awarded an MA in Philosophy at the University of Durham, for her many valuable suggestions and for producing a computerized version of the book. I am grateful, as well, to several friends whose ideas and suggestions I have made use of. Finally, I express my thanks to Sarah Lloyd and her colleagues at Ashgate Publishing for commissioning this book and seeing it through to publication.

Kalyan Sen Gupta

CHAPTER 1

Rabindranath Tagore: His Life and Thought

The primary aim of this book is to introduce to readers who are not familiar with the writings of Tagore, or who know only his poetry, the main philosophical themes discussed by this remarkable Indian man of letters. In the second part of this opening chapter, an overview is offered of the essentially 'spiritual' inspiration for and orientation of Tagore's philosophy, and the issue is addressed of the extent to which, and the sense in which, he was 'a philosopher' at all. Before that, it will be useful to provide a brief account of Tagore's long, full and varied life. This account is not only of biographical interest, for his was a life intertwined in various respects with his philosophy. Indeed it was his conviction, as we shall see at certain stages in the book, that problems which defy solution at an abstract, intellectual level may nevertheless be resolved at the 'existential' level of one's everyday life. Certainly he viewed his own life as one in which he struggled to resolve such issues.

Tagore: A Short Biography

We learn many things about Tagore's life from his autobiographies, *Jivansmriti* and *My Boyhood Days*, in which he tells us about his childhood, his private tutor, his experience at school, the death of his mother, his deep friendship with his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi, his grief when she committed suicide, and much else. Another important book, *Atmaparichaya*, a narrative of the gradual development of his poetic life, is described by Tagore as telling of a voyage of progressive self-discovery. Further details of his life are provided in the several biographies of Tagore now available. These include *Life and Works of Rabindranath* (4 volumes) by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay and *Life of Rabindranath* (9 volumes so far) by Prasanta Kumar Pal, both in Bengali, and a short biography of Tagore in English by Krishna Kripalani.

Rabindranath was born on 7 May, 1861. His grandfather Dwarakanath was a business magnate, as well as the owner of huge landed estates. A close associate of Rammohun Roy, the architect of Bengal renaissance, he was well known for his generosity and public charities. He visited Europe twice, met with Max Müller and Queen Victoria, and died in London. Rabindranath

never saw him, in fact, and in his writings we find practically no reference to his grandfather. Tagore's father Debendranath (1817–1905), who was a close disciple of Rammohun Roy, revived the reformist Hindu sect Brahmo Samaj, founded by Rammohun. His life exemplified a type of Indian spiritualism with its roots in the teachings of the Upanishads.[1] Being the son of the wealthy Dwarakanath, he was brought up in some luxury; however, he remained indifferent to his wealth, leading a life that was austere, controlled, and governed by a stern sense of duty. In many places, Rabindranath speaks of the great role that the model of his father played in his own life.

Tagore belonged to a family which was one of the most gifted in Bengal, making significant contributions in the realms of religious thought, philosophy, literature, music and painting. Dwijendranath, his eldest brother, was a brilliant young man whose interests included poetry, philosophy, mathematics and music. Another brother, Satyendranath, who was to become the first Indian member of the Indian Civil Service, translated many works into Bengali, including a book on the Buddha. A third brother, Jyotirindranath, was a gifted musician and playwright, while his wife, Kadambari Devi, was an authority on contemporary Bengali writing. Tagore's nephew, Abanindranath, was to become famous for his contributions to painting and literature. As Rabindranath himself puts it:

> Most of the members of my family had some gift … some were artists, some poets, some musicians, and the whole atmosphere was permeated with the spirit of creation.[2]

Tagore was not educated in a school (except for a brief period), college or university. In fact, he had a horror of having to learn under pressure, in classes which, he felt, would offer him no real instruction and inspiration. Nonetheless, he was a man of profound learning: well-versed in the Sanskrit classics, in Bengali and English literature, and in continental European literature, mainly through English translations. However, he knew French, as well as enough German to read Heine and Goethe in the original. He also had a great interest in the different branches of science. Here, his father played a significant role, when he was a young boy, his father acquainted him with the stars and planets, and with various aspects of physics and the earth-sciences. Tagore was to write a monograph on astronomy, a discipline that provided him with many metaphors for his poetry. For example:

> I look at the world
> In its true, full essence,
> At the millions of stars in the sky
> Carrying their huge, harmonious beauty
> Never breaking their rhythm
> Or losing their truth,

> Never deranged,
> Never stumbling.
> I can only gaze and I see, in the sky,
> The spreading layers
> Of a vast radiant, petalled rose.[3]

Tagore's adult life was inextricably involved with many of the great events and movements of the period. One thinks, for example, of his intimate association with the Indian National Congress and the independence movement. It was one of his songs, 'Janaganamana adhinayaka', that was sung at the twenty-sixth session of the Congress in Calcutta (1911) and was later to become the national song of India.

In 1912, Tagore visited England and America, translated his best-known collection of poems, *Gitanjali*, into English, and read these translations to distinguished gatherings on both sides of the Atlantic. From all reports, the audiences were spell-bound. Here, for example, is what W.B. Yeats said at that time:

> I have carried the manuscript of these translations with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me. These lyrics – which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention, display … a world I have dreamed of all my life long.[4]

Given such appreciation, it is unsurprising, perhaps, that Tagore was knighted and, in 1913, awarded the Nobel Prize in recognition of his outstanding literary activities.

In March of 1915 he met Gandhi for the first time at Shantiniketan. It was the beginning of a friendship based on more than mutual admiration. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the two men had differences on many political, social and economic issues – for example, on the efficacy of the boycott of English educational institutions in India, and on the value and limits of encouraging traditional handicrafts. But each cordially accepted the other's right to differ, and their disagreements never affected their personal relations. Gandhiji used to call Tagore 'the great sentinel', while Tagore addressed him as 'Mahatma' ('the great soul').

In 1919, the Jalianwallah massacre took place at Amritsar, and Rabindranath wrote a historic letter on 30 May to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, in which he renounced his knighthood in protest against the inhuman cruelty of the British Government to the people of Punjab. In this letter, he wrote:

> The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India … [T]he very least I can

> do for my country is to take all consequences upon myself in giving voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguished terror. The time has come, when badges of honour make our shame glaring in their incongruous context of humiliation …[5]

In 1920–21 Tagore travelled again to America and to a number of European countries, where he spoke on such themes as 'East and West' and the idea of an international university. After his return on July 1921, he engaged in criticism of the Non-Cooperation Movement that had been initiated by Gandhi, expressing his objections in such articles as 'The Meeting of Cultures' and 'The Call of Truth'. In December of the same year, the educational institution of Visva Bharati was formally inaugurated. Tagore had given everything he had – his lands and even the interest rights on the Nobel Prize money – for the development of this institution. In this project, he was greatly helped by his wife Mrinalini Devi, who had not hesitated to sell all her valuables to tide the family over in the financial crisis. The following year, Tagore was able to found Sriniketan (Department of Rural Reconstruction) in Visva Bharati.

In 1924, Tagore visited China, where he lectured in various universities, focusing on the need for cooperation between Asian countries. These lectures were collected and published as *Talks in China*. (Several years later, in 1937, with the intention of strengthening India's fellowship with China, he opened the China Bhaban.) Then 1926 saw him in Italy, where he met the leading Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce after lecturing on 'The Meaning of Art'. In the conversation that followed between Tagore and Croce, the latter said to him:

> The pleasure is all mine on having been able to come to see you. You do not know how much I admire your poetry. Not only for its thoughts, but for its sober form … And I am an admirer of your philosophy and your literary criticism.[6]

Tagore was also invited by the novelist and musicologist Romain Rolland to Villeneuve in Switzerland where they exchanged their views with one another on such diverse topics as Western music and the growing menace of fascism.[7]

Tagore was invited, in 1930, to deliver the Hibbert Lectures on *The Religion of Man*. The future President of India, Radhakrishnan, who was then in Oxford as the first Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics, attended his lectures. After his concluding lecture at Manchester College, L.P. Jack, the Principal of the College, observed: 'We shall never forget in Oxford the gift you have given us and the inspiration you have brought to us'. In the same year, on 14 July, there took place Tagore's famous conversation with Albert Einstein, which centred around the issue of whether truth, beauty and religious value are independent of the human mind or not. Over such issues, they respectfully begged to differ.

In 1931, Tagore visited Moscow at the invitation of the Soviet government, and was impressed, as we know from his *Letters from Russia*, by his experience of both the Soviet education system and the cooperatives. Tagore, then was an indefatigable traveller to foreign countries, in which he attempted, with considerable success, to serve as a mediator between Western and Eastern cultures. Partly as a result of such efforts, Oxford University conferred on him the degree of DLitt in 1940 at a special Convocation in Shantiniketan, where Maurice Gwyar, Chief Justice of India, and Radhakrishnan served as the University's representatives. By this time, however, Tagore was preoccupied and deeply distressed by the outbreak of the war in Europe, one which conjured up for him 'the vision of a huge demon which had no shape, no meaning, yet had two arms that could strike, and break and tear, a gaping mouth that could devour, and bulging brains that could conspire and plan'.[8] Tagore's distress was compounded by the worsening Hindu–Muslim discord in his own country. Despite his depression, however, in *Crisis in Civilization*, written only a few days before his death, he expressed his unwavering faith in man, in the opening of a new chapter in history after 'the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice'. Rabindranath Tagore died on 7 August, 1941, at the age of eighty.

Few have questioned Rabindranath's greatness as a poet or the versatility of his genius. There is scarcely a genre of literature – poetry, short story, novel, drama – which he did not enrich. He was also the composer of genuinely original music. The words of his songs have depth, while the tunes to which he set them are alternately exciting, sweet and soulful. Much of his music is an interesting blend of Indian and Western traditions. Certainly his compositions, huge in number and in variety, constitute an impressive and rich repertoire for his people. Tagore was, moreover, a highly accomplished painter, even though he never attended a school of art or took lessons from a teacher of art. His paintings are as original as his musical compositions, innovatory in their use of both line and colour. In addition to these artistic productions, Tagore wrote an extremely large number of essays and books. In these works, he manifests his deep socio-political, as well as spiritual, convictions, and in effect presents us with a whole philosophy and vision of life and the world. The following tribute paid to Tagore by Haraprasad Shastri gives one a sense of the range of his literary achievement:

> He has tried all phases of literature – couplets, stanzas, short poems, longer pieces, short stories, fables, novels, and prose romances, dramas, farces, comedies and tragedies, songs, operas, … and last but not least, lyric poems. He has succeeded in every phase of literature he has touched … His essays are illuminating, his sarcasms biting, his satires piercing. His estimate of old poets is deeply appreciative, and his grammatical and lexicographical speculations go further inward than those of most of us.[9]

Tagore, however, was more than a writer and artist. As the brief sketch of his life suggests, he responded equally to the call of action, to the summons occasionally to escape 'the intoxicating embrace of the Muse' and to engage at a very practical level with the situation of his fellow human beings. Hence his direct involvement in social reconstruction and educational experiment. Although he mainly avoided the turmoil of political life, he was no less concerned than Gandhi with social issues and the question of how Indian society should be most effectively moulded. It is perhaps in the realm of educational innovation that Tagore's practical energies and commitments had their most lasting impact. Painful memories of his own brief experience at school, together with his sympathy for the victims of a traditional, mechanical system of education, inspired him to translate his pedagogic idea of a truly creative education into practice. It was for this reason that he established Visva Bharati at Shantiniketan, an institution that was modelled on the forest hermitages of ancient India, but which had the further purpose of serving as a channel of communication between the East and the West. As Tagore himself puts it:

> No one nation today can progress, if the others are left outside its boundaries. Let us try to win the heart of the West with all that is best and not base in us, and think of her and deal with her, not in revenge or contempt, but with good will and understanding, in a spirit of mutual respect. Our institution of Visva-Bharati represents this ideal of cooperation, of the spiritual unity of man.[10]

By any standards, Rabindranath Tagore's was a remarkably full and accomplished life. We now turn our attention to one area of that accomplishment, his philosophical contribution.

Rabindranath and His Spirituality

Rabindranath Tagore is basically a poet. This is how he is widely acknowledged and there has been much less focus on his standing as a philosopher. Tagore had no professional training, nor any academic degree, in philosophy. He did not construct any philosophical system, nor did he think of himself as a philosopher. When Ajit Chakraborty, a celebrated thinker and close associate of Rabindranath, described Tagore as a philosopher in his book, *Rabindranath* (1910), Tagore did not take the description very seriously. He was not persuaded that he was doing philosophy, or that his thought was really philosophical. This was despite Radhakrishnan's book, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (1919), and the invitations he received to give the presidential address to the Indian Philosophical Association (1926) and the Hibbert Lectures on *The Religion of Man* at Oxford (1931), and to contribute a paper to Radhakrishnan's edited volume, *Contemporary Indian*

Philosophy (1936). (This paper later appeared as a separate monograph, *The Religion of an Artist*.) In a letter to Radhakrishnan, he wrote: '… about my philosophy, I am like M. Jourdain who had been talking prose all his life without knowing it.'[11] His point here is that while others, like Radhakrishnan, might well discover philosophy in his writings, this was not something he himself consciously intended to produce.

Was Tagore right? Is it true that he was no philosopher? That he was not a philosopher in the professional or academic sense of the term hardly settles the matter. We need to reflect on the character of philosophy. These days, we are apt to set poets and philosophers apart. The familiar view of the distinction is nicely captured by Richard Rorty: 'The philosopher had thought of himself as speaking a sparse, pure, transparent language. The poetess shyly hoped that her unmediated woodnotes might please.'[12] Philosophy, on the view Rorty describes, uses cold reason and sophisticated technique of logic, and speaks a 'transparent' language uncontaminated by any emotional tone. A poet, on the other hand, is intent on expressing emotion and conveying it, not transparently, but through suggestion and metaphor. A philosopher endeavours to impress us through the power of reason, while a poet aims only to satisfy our aesthetic sense, to inspire an emotional response. In studying philosophy, we hope to obtain objective understanding; in reading poetry, we seek attunement to the feelings of the poet. What a poet writes, on this view, cannot be translated into the sparse language of reason, so that the philosopher accordingly finds his words expressive only of subjective, even 'private', moods. Consequently it has come to be a mark of derogation to refer to a philosopher as, 'really', only being a poet. 'Philosophers would claim to write,' as Rorty once more puts it, 'in a clear, transparent way, priding themselves on manly straightforwardness, on abjuring "literary" devices.'[13]

If we are convinced by this poet–philosopher polarity, then we shall indeed suspect that Rabindranath the poet is no philosopher. And certainly we do not find him employing any of the 'philosophical methods' that have found favour in modern Anglo-American academic circles. Nor does he have any great respect for or confidence in the notion of 'rigorous argumentation'. As he once put it, 'The spring of our ideas is dried up when we keep company with our argumentative friends.'[14] Or again, he warns us to 'keep off your reason or argument when I am imagining my infinite life by looking at stars at night, when I am roaming across the universe, when I am enjoying my intimacy with new lives of innumerable planets'.[15] In a short play, *Subtle Analysis*, Tagore comically depicts the dryness and futility of an obsession with analysis, suggesting that people with such an obsession can tie themselves in knots over the simplest matters. At one point in the play, the following conversation takes place between two of the protagonists:

Kebalram: Are you well?
Chandicharan: What does it mean to be well?
Kebalram: I mean, are you sound in health?
Chandicharan: What is the meaning of 'health'?
Kebalram: I was asking something relating to your body.
Chandicharan: Now I see. You want to know about my body. Then why do you ask how I am? Is 'how my body is' identical with 'how I am'? First, you must have to identify what 'I' am.
Kebalram: You are Chandicharan Babu … ?
Chandicharan: Highly debatable.
Kebalram: Why? You may enquire from your father why this name is given to you.
Chandicharanbabu: What is 'name'? What is the meaning of it?
Kebalram: Pardon me. It has not been proper for me to ask you how you are. I promise not to bother you any more with such questions
Chandicharan: To decide whether I am well, it is necessary to know the conditions that will ensure that I am well, and further, whether those conditions will always hold good for my being well.
Kebalram: Oh, Sir! I am hungry. I must leave now. Please postpone your discussion until another time in the future.[16]

In Tagore's writings, certainly, one finds none of the hair-splitting logical or conceptual analysis lampooned in the above conversation. But it is surely only according to a narrow and fairly recent conception of philosophy that analysis and argumentation are the essential and primary components of the philosophical enterprise. There have been and still are different conceptions, both in the East and the West, of that enterprise, including ones that refuse to drive a wedge between philosophy and poetry. It is striking, and obviously relevant when discussing Tagore's thought, that the nearest Sanskrit equivalent to 'philosophy' is *darshana* or 'vision'. The term suggests a view of philosophy as a kind of seeing, of finding new perspectives and hence fresh and fruitful ways of talking about, say, the relation of human beings to their environment and to one another.

It is just such an open, imaginative thinking that Martin Heidegger judges to be closer in spirit to the original, early Greek notion of *philosophia* than is the kind of professional enquiry now referred to as philosophy. Significantly, Heidegger calls such thinking 'poetic thinking', which he contrasts with the 'calculative' thinking characteristic of the sciences and modern philosophy. Poetic thinking, as found in the writings of, say, the nineteenth-century German poet Hölderlin, is a form of 'world-disclosure'. While there is a legitimate place for analytical, argumentational, 'calculative' thought, the greater need – especially in a modern age in which we have 'forgotten' how to think poetically – is for this disclosive or 'originative', poetic mode of thinking.[17] If so, then there is every reason to regard a great poet like Rabindranath as a philosopher for, as subsequent chapters will show, there is no doubt that he offers us an original vision of the world, that his poetry and his prose are an exercise in world-disclosure.

The term 'spirituality' is the most appropriate one for characterizing the general tenor of Rabindranath's poetic thinking. In his sense of spirituality, he was deeply influenced by the Upanishads, into which he was initiated by his father, Devendranath, during a stay at the Himalayas. While he was also receptive to ideas associated with the Bauls and Sufis of Bengal, as well as to Hindu Vaishnavism and to Buddhism, it was always to the Upanishadic endeavour to relate everything to a single ultimate reality that he remained most faithful. To be sure, he appropriated the doctrines of the Upanishads in an individual way, so that his own spiritual outlook was a distinctive one. To appreciate this, it will be useful, first, briefly to describe the main contentions of the Upanishads.

The Upanishadic seers or *ŕsis* were inspired by the aim of understanding the nature of the ultimate reality that, they believed, stands behind the mundane world of ordinary experience. Hence in the *Vrihadaranyaka*, for example, we find the following directive: 'Let the Universal Soul give us the intellect to have access to His nature.'[18] What the intellect then discovers is the existence of a supreme 'power' which pervades the entire universe. The Upanishadic seers called this impersonal power, which is immanent in the universe and sustains and regulates it, Brahman. The further Upanishadic doctrines all rest on this recognition of a 'World-Soul' or supreme power, Brahman. Not only inert objects but also *jivas* (living souls) are manifestations of this World-Soul. As the *Vrihadaranyaka* observes, 'Know Him [Brahman] as your inner, immortal soul who is present in all living beings, and is yet different from them, who controls them from within without their cognizance of it.'[19] In this way the Upanishads purport to highlight the central metaphysical truth about ourselves. Each of us is an expression of the Universal Soul, or, put differently, each of us *is* this same Soul or *atman*. Now if each of us belongs to the Universal Soul, if the same Infinite is equally present in all of us, then we ourselves are at bottom identical or one with each other. Recognition of this truth paves the way to our openness to others, and generates in us love and concern for our fellow beings. In the *Vrihadaranyaka*, Yajnavalka says:

> The wife loves her husband not because he is her husband, or the mother loves her son not because he is her son. This love blooms only because the same self is immanent in all, only because the wife finds herself in her husband, and the mother in her son.[20]

It is only because of this sense of our oneness, as particular expressions of the same Soul, that a lover makes no distinction between his own interests and that of his beloved, or that a mother identifies her own well-being with that of her son. It is this sense of identity that draws us closer to one another, establishes intimate bonds between us, promotes our care and concern for

others, and inspires in us a positive 'inner readiness' to help others, to sacrifice our personal interests for the sake of others.

The same theme is continued in the *Isha* Upanishad. There it is argued that, if we are one, how can we possibly enjoy anything without sharing it with others, and how can we think of misappropriating another's property? Once we acknowledge this oneness, we are necessarily inhibited from doing harm to others. What is emphasized above all in the *Isha* is amity or loving-kindness towards other people, and the corresponding rejection of apathy, cruelty, violence and everything else that is destructive of cordial, harmonious relations with one another. Although he rejects the idea of a 'World-Soul', the Buddha too held that the sharp distinction we ordinarily make between different persons or selves is a superficial and dangerous one. Once this is recognized, we are able to contemplate and practise the 'divine abidings' (*Brahmavihara*), which include loving-kindness and compassion.

> Above thee, below thee, on all sides of thee, keep on all the world thy sympathy and immeasurable loving thought which is without obstruction, without any wish to injure, without enmity.[21]

For both the Upanishadic seers and the Buddha, then, our basic commitment to the good of others is grounded in an intellectual, philosophical understanding of the nature of reality. In the case of the Upanishads, what one understands is that reality is a single, seamless Brahman of which everything in the universe, including ourselves, is a manifestation.

As already noted, while Tagore's understanding of spirituality was inspired by the Upanishads, it does not simply imitate Upanishadic doctrine. Indeed, he emphatically denied that his own position rested on ancient authority:

> If I am reluctant to speak about my own view of religion, it is because I have not come to my own religion through the portals of passive acceptance of a particular view owing to some accident of birth. I was born to a family who were pioneers in the revival in our country of a religion based upon the utterance of Indian sages in the Upanishads. But owing to my idiosyncrasy of temperament, it was impossible for me to accept any religious teaching only on the ground that people in my surroundings believed it to be true.[22]

Tagore, then, had no dogmatic loyalty to the Upanishads; rather, he draws upon them in order to fashion his own account of human beings and their world. The Upanishadic concern was primarily the cognitive quest for an understanding of ultimate reality, from which there would then flow an account of human beings and their interrelationship. Tagore, however, does not commit himself to the particular doctrine of reality as an infinite spirit or World-Soul that was advanced in the Upanishads. In fact, he is suspicious of traditional metaphysical arguments for such a view. If, he writes, 'truth is the

infinite [as] pursued by metaphysics', this is not a pursuit in which he has any confidence. Metaphysical argument, however, is not the only possible approach to truth. 'Reality in all its manifestations,' writes Tagore, 'reveals itself in the emotional and imaginative background of our mind. We know it not because we can think of it, but because we directly feel it.'[23] If, then, we are to achieve a sense of something infinite or absolute, this will not be through rational argument but, as with the poet, through vision and feeling. 'All that I feel is from vision and not from knowledge.'[24] For him, this implies that any understanding of reality that we can achieve is inseparable from human emotion and perspective. As Tagore puts it, 'we can never go beyond man in all that we know and feel … I felt that I had found my religion at last, in which the infinite became defined in humanity … reality is the definition of the infinite which relates truth to the person.'[25] For Tagore, one might say, it is anthropology, not metaphysics, that should inform the philosophical enterprise.

This difference between the approaches of the Upanishads and Tagore is especially important in relation to their respective accounts of human being. What, for the ancient seers, was a matter of inference from a metaphysical doctrine is, for Tagore, a matter of direct emotional experience. It is in and through the experience of unboundedness in the blue sky above, of the beauty in a human face, or the warmth to be found in certain human relationships that, for Tagore, one receives a vivid sense of one's own being as something that is not discretely enclosed, but is intimately integrated, to the point of identity, with nature and humanity as a whole. It is in the conviction, founded in direct experience, that a person is not a discrete, 'isolated' being and may only realize his or her true nature through identification with the whole universe, that the essence of Tagore's spirituality resides.

This leitmotif of the location of a person's being outside the narrow confines of a self or ego is salient in many of Rabindranath's poems. Consider, for example, the following verse:

> Let the veil of 'I' fall apart
> and the pure light of consciousness
> break through the mists
> revealing the everlasting face of truth.[26]

In another of his poems, when the question 'Who are you?', asked by the sun, receives no answer, the poet's point is that there exists no isolated substance or object, the self. Rather, the so-called self is 'decentred': in Buddhist terminology, a person is without 'own-being' and is, rather, 'out there' in the world and among others. Intersubjectivity and what Heidegger calls our 'being-in-the-world' are the crucial dimensions of human being, not ego-hood or private autonomy.

The traditional association between spirituality and a sense of identity with the whole is not the only reason it is appropriate to speak of Tagore's vision as a spiritual one. To begin with, that vision has what may be described as a pronounced *soteriological* aspect. In a conversation with Maitreyee Devi, he said, 'I strive for a rare salvation which is the salvation of oneself from one's own self.'[27] Similarly, in his poem 'Ebar Phirao Morey' ('Turn me back'), he writes:

> What would you sing, what to speak!
> Say, striving for one's own happiness is wrong,
> One's own sorrow is a myth. Steeped in selfishness and averse
> To the world at large, he who is, has not learnt the art of living.

The point of such remarks is that it is only by transcending selfish concerns and by appreciating one's place in an integrated whole that a person may find happiness and 'salvation'. Tagore's conception of our essentially intersubjective existence is, therefore, far removed from some other conceptions familiar in modern philosophy. It could hardly be more different from, for example, the bleak picture of intersubjectivity offered by Jean-Paul Sartre in Part 3 ('Being-For-Others') of *Being and Nothingness*. For Sartre, too, I am not an 'object-in-itself', but am necessarily involved in 'reciprocal and moving relations' with others. But, in Sartre's view, those relations are essentially antagonistic: 'Conflict is the original meaning of Being-For-Others.'[28] Interpersonal life is an on-going battle in which each person struggles to affirm his or her own freedom at the expense of the other's. Here there is no hint of the possibility of a salvific relationship to others through which alone a person may attain happiness – the possibility which, as we shall see in later chapters, inspires so much of Tagore's efforts as writer, educator and reformer.

Another reason for speaking of Tagore's vision as spiritual is its distinctly *aesthetic* dimensions. In one of his lyrics, he writes:

> Step out of yourself, and stand outside
> You will hear within you the music of the entire universe.[29]

In 'stepping out' of one's narrow self, a person does not simply experience a whole to which he belongs but, as it were, a 'symphonic' whole – one of beauty and harmony. As Tagore himself strikingly puts it:

> In the night we stumble over things and become acutely conscious of their individual separateness. But the day reveals the greater unity which embraces them. The man whose inner vision is bathed in an illumination of his consciousness … no longer awkwardly stumbles over individual facts of separateness in the human world, accepting them as final. He realizes that peace lies in harmony …[30]

It is surely this emphasis on harmony with the whole – with nature as much as with humanity – as an aesthetic condition that explains why Tagore refers to his own religious perspective as 'a poet's religion' or 'the religion of an artist'.[31]

Since Tagore's notion of harmony is central to his whole thinking, with his other main concepts revolving around it, it will be useful, by way of scene-setting, to say a little more about it in this introductory chapter. According to an analogy that he frequently draws, just as the strings of a musical instrument produce music not in isolation, but together in an harmonious relation with one another, so it is only in interpersonal relations that human beings produce a 'music' of the spirit. The human world is necessarily a 'with-world', within which it is only through appropriate attunement to others that any individual may realize himself. The harmonious relations with others that Tagore envisages are not just those that do or might obtain within a given society or culture. The ideal of human solidarity that he invokes is one that transcends particular cultures.

> Actually speaking, cultures are different. What is needed is eagerness of heart for a fruitful communication between different cultures. Anything that prevents this is barbarism.[32]

This explains his critique (discussed in Chapter 2) of the disharmonious relations that are created by nationalistic and ethnocentric creeds that preach the hegemony of one people or group over others. Despite the conflicts he witnessed in his own times, and not least in his own country, Tagore retained the conviction that a plurality of different cultures, far from guaranteeing dissonance, offers the opportunity for the more global harmony or 'symphony' of humankind.

It is in the context of this 'symphonic' ideal that we should understand three of the concepts that Tagore regularly invokes – surplus, love and freedom. The term 'surplus', which we shall encounter on several occasions in the following chapters, indicates the capacity of a human being, once his or her biological and other basic needs are met, to transcend individual and pragmatic concerns. It indicates, one might say, a person's sense that his or her worth lies in relation to what is beyond the confines of self. As Tagore puts it, 'I am certain that I felt a larger meaning of my own self when the barrier vanished between me and what was beyond myself.' Or again:

> Our imagination makes us intensely conscious of a life we must live which transcends the individual life and contradicts the biological meaning of the instinct of self-preservation.[33]

This transcendence of individual confinement that our 'surplus' capacity enables may be manifested in many spheres of human life – in our fellowship

with other persons, in artistic endeavour, in religion, and in our harmony with the natural world.

Tagore's concept of love is also to be understood by reference to the ideal of harmony. 'Whatever name our logic may give to the truth of human unity,' he says, 'the fact can never be ignored that we have our greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love.'[34] Love, for Tagore, is precisely the feeling whereby human solidarity can be achieved. This does not mean that love is a 'mere' sentiment, for there is something 'truthful' about love. Love involves an *appropriate* stance towards other human beings, as creatures who are not objects, but other subjects intimately involved in one another's identity. Other people belong among 'us', not 'them'. To be sure, the truth that is contained in love is not one we could recognize through detached intellectual reasoning. As the Buddha, too, appreciated, it is only through such affective experiences as love and compassion that one fully appreciates the superficiality and error of regarding people as distinct, hermetically sealed selves.

Finally, the idea of freedom, for Tagore, is not that, simply, of independence and non-interference. Such a conception, in fact, is only embraced by people who already feel alienated from one another. Freedom, in Tagore's view, is an altogether more 'positive' thing and requires harmony in one's relations with others and, indeed, the world as a whole. The point is well made in one of Tagore's stories.[35] Here an ascetic has renounced the world for the sake of truth and freedom, but finds himself yearning to return to the girl, an 'untouchable', whom he had abandoned for the ascetic life. He comes to understand that freedom and salvation lie not in abandoning the world but in intimate communion with and love of other people. The story illustrates Rabindranath's focus on what he calls 'the freedom of social relationship' which one attains by accepting responsibility to one's community and, in effect, to humanity at large. It is worth citing, in this connection, the following remarks from *The Religion of Man*:

> One may imagine that an individual who succeeds in dissociating himself from his fellows attains real freedom, in as much as all ties of relationship imply obligation to others. But we know that … it is true that in the human world only a perfect arrangement of interdependence gives rise to freedom. The most individualistic of human beings who owe no responsibility are the savages who fail to attain their fullness of manifestation … Only those may attain freedom … who have the power to cultivate mutual understanding and co-operation. The history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship.[36]

Freedom, Tagore is arguing, is not something to value if it is exercised in isolation from others. It is something to prize only when it is seen as the possibility of extending the boundaries of the ego through engagement with

others. Freedom, so understood, is linked with obligation. Obligation relates us to others, not as a burden they impose upon us, but as one of the forms of interpersonal relations through which we and they belong to a single human community. Our obligations to one another are not, moreover, discovered through moral reason or divine revelation. Ultimately, our sense of true freedom and obligation is founded on the experience of love. This is why Rabindranath is able to speak of 'freedom as we feel [it] in the love of our friend' and of the duties that loving friendship entails. Freedom, one might say, lies in removing all limits to love.

So far in this discussion of Tagore's ideal of harmony, I have focused on his call for human solidarity and community. But no account of that ideal, or of the spirituality of his thought, would be complete unless we consider, as well, his insistence on the essential kinship of man with nature. A sense of such kinship remained with Tagore from his childhood. 'From my infancy,' he says, 'I had a keen sensitiveness which kept my mind tingling with consciousness of the world around me – nature and human.'[37] When referring to this kinship, he often invokes his analogy between spiritual harmony and music.

> The grand orchestra of the universe has filled my heart
> In many a quiet moment in my imagination.
> The inaccessible snow-clad mountain peaks in their
> Infinite solitude of blue
> Have sent to my heart many an invitation.[38]

Nature, a harmony of lines, colours, life and movement, is itself compared to a work of art: it is a song, an expression of beauty. 'We find,' the poet writes, 'that the endless rhymes of the world … strike our heart strings and produce music.'[39] And in this music of nature one finds another extension of one's being. The beauty of nature provides us with an eternal assurance of our spiritual relation to it, thereby widening our individual parameters. It seems, in fact, that it was his experience of nature that originally inspired in Tagore his ideal of harmony.

> During the discussion of my own religious experience I express my belief that the first stage of my realization was through my feeling of intimacy with Nature – not that Nature which has its channels of information for our mind and physical relationship with our living body, but that which satisfies our personality with manifestations that make our life rich and stimulate our imagination in their harmony of forms, colours, sounds and movement.[40]

The happiness, love and freedom we experience in intimate relationships with other people have their analogues in the experience of nature. The person open to the beauty of nature will establish with it bonds of love that, like those with a friend, also liberate.

There is a further aspect of Tagore's notions of harmony and spirituality that any full account of them must mention. While he never denies the importance of social concerns and relations, he also emphasizes a mode of one's relationship to oneself. This takes the form of a constant striving for realization of an inner harmony. A human being, Tagore says, 'is aware that he is not imperfect but incomplete. He knows that in himself some meaning has yet to be realized … The call is deep in his mind – the call of his inner truth which is beyond … analytic logic.'[41] The primary form that this quest for 'inner truth' takes is engagement, not in social institutions, but in art. It is only in and through the kind of creativity that is most salient in artistic production – through fashioning and refashioning his life – that a person's life comes truly to reflect what he or she *is*. For to be a human being is, in important part, to be an individual that is never finally 'defined' or 'completed', but always, one might say, 'on the way' to becoming someone new. In art, more than anywhere else, a person exercises a uniquely human freedom and hence, in the language of existentialist thinkers, lives 'authentically'. '[One's] true life is in [one's] creation, which represents the infinity of man.'[42]

We have identified three dimensions to Tagore's conception or ideal of spiritual harmony: interpersonal human solidarity, kinship with nature, and self-integrity through artistic creativity. These three dimensions are the themes of the following four chapters. In Chapters 2 and 3, we are mainly concerned, therefore, with Tagore's social and political philosophy, including its relationship to that of his great contemporary and friend, Gandhi. In Chapter 4, we examine Tagore's account of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, while in the first half of the final chapter we are occupied with his discussion of selfhood, 'innerness' and art. That chapter closes with a discussion of a question that often occupied Tagore himself: that of the feasibility in the modern world of the ideal that he urges upon us.

Notes

1 The Upanishads (*circa* 6th–3rd century BCE) are the speculative, philosophical portions of the orally transmitted Vedic corpus. The Upanishads are presented in the forms of dialogue, anecdote, parable and allegory. The main theme of these writings is that of a Supreme Spirit or Brahman which pervades the world.

2 *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, 3 vols, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1999, vol. 2, p. 587.

3 'On the Sick Bed', poem 21, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 15 vols, Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1961, vol. 3, p. 801.

4 Introduction to *Gitanjali*, *The English Writings*, vol 1, p. 39.

5 Letter from Tagore to the Viceroy, 30 May 1919; cited in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1997, p. 5

6 *The English Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 888–9.
7 Ibid., pp. 890–97.
8 Ibid., p. 531.
9 Cf. 'Foreword', in Ramananda Chatterjee (ed.), *The Golden Book of Tagore*, Calcutta: The Golden Book Committee, 1931, p. iii.
10 *The English Writings*, vol. 2, p. 599.
11 Taken from Satyendranath Roy (ed.), *World of Ideas of Rabindranath: Selection from Tagore* (in Bengali), Calcutta: Granthalaya Private Limited, 1992, pp. 3–4.
12 Richard Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, 3 vols, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991, vol. 2, p. 86.
13 Ibid.
14 'Tarkik' ('Logician'), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 13, p. 591.
15 Ibid., p. 592.
16 *Hasya Kautuk* (comic short plays), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 6, pp. 127–9.
17 See the discussion in J.G. Gray, 'Poets and Thinkers – Their Kindred Roles in the Philosophy of Heidegger', in Edward N. Lee and Maurice Mandelbaum (eds), *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967, p. 97.
18 *Vrihadaranyaka*, quoted in Hiranmoy Banerji, 'Upanishad and Rabindranath' (in Bengali), *The Journal of Rabindra Bharati University*, 14:1 (January–March), 1976, p. 46.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 50.
21 Quoted in Rabindranath's *The Religion of Man*, London: George Allen & Unwin, [1931] 1970, p. 43.
22 Taken from Roy, *World of Ideas*, pp. 385–6.
23 *The Religion of Man*, pp. 81–2.
24 Ibid., p. 6.
25 Ibid., pp. 72, 60, 84.
26 *Arogyo,* poem 33, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, p. 835. These poems were collected and arranged by my friend Professor Goutam Biswas. I have also utilized some of his ideas with profit and I express my gratitude to him.
27 See Sankho Ghosh, *A Amir Abaran* (in Bengali), Calcutta: Papyrus, 1991, p. 40.
28 Quoted from Mary Warnock, *The Philosophy of Sartre*, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1966, pp. 83–4.
29 Song 356 in *Gitabitan*, 3 vols, Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1932.
30 *The Religion of Man*, p. 167.
31 Ibid., p. 58; see also Tagore's *The Religion of an Artist*, Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1988.
32 *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 11, p. 1094.
33 *The Religion of Man*, pp. 62, 33.
34 Ibid., p. 30.
35 *Lipika*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 7, pp. 825–7.
36 *The Religion of Man*, p. 116.
37 Ibid., p. 61.
38 *Janmodine*, poem 10, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, p. 845.
39 *Creative Unity*, London: Macmillan & Co. (Indian edition), 1962, p. 35.
40 *The Religion of Man*, p. 12.
41 Ibid., p. 36.
42 Ibid., p. 89.

CHAPTER 2

Society, Marriage and Education

As already noted in the previous chapter, one's deepest identity, according to Rabindranath, is that which binds one with one's fellow humans. But under actual social conditions, problems arise which adversely affect this interrelation and, indeed, gnaw at the very vitals of a society. In this and the following chapter we consider the social and political issues to which Tagore gives serious thought in his various writings. As we shall see, his reactions and suggestions, approval and disapproval are all motivated by his dream of a beautiful society, of a better human universe. A distinction between the social and the political, while rough and ready, is a convenient one to draw. Accordingly, the present chapter is devoted to aspects of Tagore's social thinking, while in the following chapter we turn to his more specifically political views on, for example, Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement.

Hindu and Muslim

Tagore has a utopian vision of India as a place of pilgrimage for the happy abode of different races, tribes and religions. This may be represented as a plea for the need to deterritorialize the world – the object being to forge social and cultural ties between different nations, and drive home a sense of fellow-feeling that cuts across borders. He realizes that Indian culture cannot thrive unless there is space for harmony and interchange, but recognizes that the India of his vision, as the icon of a deterritorialized world, does not exist, that actual circumstances do not fit with his dream. He is painfully aware of the alarming distance and rivalry between people, particularly between the two major religions of India, Hindu and Muslim. This became more evident to him when, in 1926, he personally witnessed the Calcutta riots which, in fact, started with an incident in the locality around his Calcutta residence at Jorasanko. These riots were preceded and followed by similar events in Lahore, Delhi and other cities. Tagore was deeply shocked by this deterioration of commmunal relations, by a 'satanic bestiality which wears the garb of religion'. Of course, he does not merely note this problem. He wants to trace the reasons for this disharmony and think of ways to bridge this distance, to alleviate this terrible conflict of communities.

In 'Hindu Musalman' (Hindu–Muslim),[1] Rabindranath points out that once the Hindus and the Muslims were close to one another despite the differences

between them. They were not indeed free from religious dogmatism, but religion had not dominated the problems, events and activities of their everyday life. Moreover, beyond the limits of their respective communities, there was ample room for their union, and free interchange. It is a historical fact that communalism came into existence only with the birth of political consciousness, when people began to think in terms of their narrow group interests emanating from a strong religious bias, when religious dogmatism gave way to religious fanaticism. This communalism was fanned by the 'divide and rule' policy of the British rulers (whom Tagore calls 'small English men' as opposed to 'great English men'). As he puts it in 'Sabhyatar Sankat' ('Crisis of Civilization'):

> The greatest misfortune that has now confronted India is not only the unfortunate lack of food, cloth and education, but is, more crucially, the barbarous inner discord among the Indians which has no parallel. The danger is that our society is held responsible for it. But the misfortune is gradually becoming so severe day by day that such a dehumanized and uncivilized consequence of Indian history could never happen if it were not nourished by the indulgence from a secret corner of government machinery.[2]

In confirmation of Tagore's perception, we may quote the observation of Lord George Hamilton, the Secretary of State, as evidence of the British resolve to take advantage of Hindu–Muslim communalism: '… while to wish for the unity of ideas and action would be very dangerous politically, divergence of ideas or collision are administratively troublesome. Of the two the latter is the least risky, though it throws anxiety and responsibility upon those on the spot where the friction exists.'[3] By following this policy, the British were able to make the Muslims suspicious of the national movement. Rabindranath was very critical of this Muslim non-participation. Incidentally this was also the view of Abul Maulana Azad who believed in a united struggle against the British. He said:

> Indian Muslims followed blindly the policy of the British government … [They] broke off all relations with the Hindus who were the real active group in the country … We were warned that the Hindus were a majority and if we went along with them they would crush us … The result was that the government which should otherwise have become the target of the Muslims' spears was saved, and their own neighbours became their mark instead.[4]

The above shows how the responsibility for communalism was borne by the divide and rule policy of the British. What, however, is important to consider is why the British were able to provoke the evil of communalism. The background to it, according to Rabindranath, was provided by religious and social conditions which had already created an inner distance between the two communities.

In 'Samasya' or 'Problem',[5] he recognizes that it is very difficult to solve the Hindu–Muslim problem because both the communities remain firm within the boundaries of their respective religions. It is religion which divides their human worlds and isolates them from one another. Certainly, there must be some difference between self and others. But when this difference exceeds certain limits, it does great harm. In this connection, Tagore holds that the Hindu–Muslim condition is analogous to that of a primitive Bushman tribe. People belonging to the Bushman tribe instantly kill others not belonging to their tribe. This shows that they are confined to extreme barbarism, since they do not realize that one's expansion lies in union and not in enmity with others. Similarly, Rabindranath holds, the Hindus and the Muslims keep themselves separate from one another, and it is religion that has enabled this. Little matters to them that is not visibly connected with their own religion. It is this religion by which they shield themselves from all others in the world. And this sense of difference due to religion has built up such a strong wall between them that they forget that human expansion consists in a harmonious bond with others, that the identity of man is above creed and religion.

Instead, religion has become the arbiter of their relationship to one another. Let the other remain permanently the other – this is what the Hindus wish. They have moved further away from people of a different religion, rather than moving closer to them. The Muslims, while they strongly identify as 'others' those who do not belong to their religion, nonetheless wish to convert them to this religion. In other words, the practices of the Hindus are to make their religion an inaccessible fort to protect its sanctity, while the Muslims have used religion as an weapon to attack others, and extend their religious territory. Hence the Hindus and the Muslims are under the spell of two kinds of religious mentality, two kinds of insanity. As it stands, they form the two major religious communities in India with no communion between them. The Hindus refuse to accept the legitimacy of Islam and look down upon the Muslims as *yavanas* (foreigners, untouchables). The Muslims, on the other hand, also strongly maintain their religious distance from the Hindus, but aim at cultural hegemony; the Hindus are *kafirs* to them. So any attempt to bring about a mutual approach of the two communities presents a serious problem. Pernicious communalism is bound to prosper when the people do not listen to the true voice of religion which gets hidden behind blind rituals, false stigmas and narrow sectarianism.

In a letter to Kalidas Nag, an eminent historian of Bengal, Tagore further brings to light the differences in the religious attitudes of the Hindus and the Muslims which have created an impassable gap between them.[6] He holds that the Muslims are so firmly committed to their own religion that they do not hesitate to destroy other religions or forcibly convert non-Muslims to their religion. For this reason, there is no way to be united with them without adopting their religion; 'Muslim Christian' is a contradiction in

terms. The Hindus are equally surrounded by their religious faith. But they are less aggressive and exercise only non-cooperation with non-Hindus. They are not inclined to intrude into other religions, but they will not allow any alien religion in their own arena. Hindu religion has in effect been reduced to a network of established customs and practices. In this context, Rabindranath narrates his experience when he found that, in his estates office, Muslims were not allowed to sit on the same mattress as Hindus. This brought home to him how Hindus regarded people of other faiths as outsiders, as profane. Prohibition and refusal constituted the driving force of Hindu religion, at the cost of warm human relationships and harmony.

Tagore also attends to the social conditions that encourage the Hindu–Muslim divide, stressing that Hindu–Muslim confrontation should not be viewed only as religious in character. If we want fully to understand this confrontation, we should also look into the social roots of Hindu–Muslim relations. In 'Samasya',[7] he observes that the two communities are separated not only by their religion, but also by their internal social conventions. The Hindus remain faithful to a system of untouchability and prohibition in their social practices. This has resulted in a split in Hindu society arising from the many internal divisions and caste-barriers which are detrimental to unity. But there is no such pathological discrimination among Muslims, which has made them socially stronger, more cohesive, than the Hindus. While the Muslim community reverberates with internal strength, the Hindu community is sick and weak due to internal discrimination. This is the historical reason why many lower-caste Hindus found in Islam a liberating force and embraced it. 'Deprived of Sanskritization,' in the words of Engineer, 'they welcomed Islamization.'[8] It is not certain whether this conversion improved their social position, but it did give them a sense of pride when they found that they could freely enter mosques and pray standing in the same line with upper-class Muslims. They found that they had regained a human dignity so long denied to them by the upper-class Hindus.

When Rabindranath draws our attention to this, an important insight is provided. Anti-secularism is sustained not only by religion, but also by dogmatic social ideologies which make one hostile to alternative ideologies and induce one to dominate others both within and outside one's community. It is this lust for social and economic domination which has blighted relations between upper-class and lower-class Hindus and between Hindus and Muslims. This was in a sense also recognized by Lord Wavell. As the eminent historian, Sarvepalli Gopal, records:

> As late as 1946 the Viceroy Lord Wavell, who could sometimes in private slip into honesty, acknowledged this. 'Though I agree as to the contrast between the Muslim and Hindu outlook on life and that the masses can be worked on mainly by the appeal to religion, I think that the root of the political conflict … lies in the fear of economic domination, rather than difference of religion. It has been found

> that Hindus and Muslims can live together without conflict when there is no fear of economic and social domination, e.g. in the army.'[9]

Tagore's intention is clear – to articulate the religious and social reasons that have contributed to the alienation of the one community from the other, to their mutual distrust, hatred and antagonism. Certainly he was highly critical of religious and ethnic communalism, and in his literary works he tries to create a climate resonant with non-communalist love and sympathy. For example, in his novel *Bauthakuranir Hat*,[10] the tyrant ruler Pratapaditya sent two pathan Muslims to kill his uncle, Basanta Roy. But what ultimately happened was that one of the pathans was so overwhelmed by the simplicity, cordiality and music of Basanta Roy that he resolved not to kill him, even though he was a *kafir*. He confessed to Basanta Roy that he and his brother were appointed by Pratapaditya to take his life. But eventually he realized that they could not do it, for while they could destroy the whole world at the command of the king, but they had no right to destroy even a single inch of heaven. We find in the character of the pathan a display of non-communalist respect and appreciation, of humanitarian good sense.

Again, in the novel *Rajarshi*,[11] we find Bilwan Thakur, a Hindu Brahmin, generously serving the people of a Muslim area ravaged by a terrible epidemic. He nursed the sick Muslims, gave them food, water and medicine, and buried the dead. The Hindus were extremely surprised by this conduct of an orthodox Brahmin. But Bilwan replied, 'I am an ascetic. I have no caste. That I am a man is my only identity. What's the use of talking about caste when the people are dying, when man is in need of love from man?' The Hindus hesitated to blame him for his disinterested effort to help the Muslims. They were not sure whether this was good or bad. Their narrow and incomplete religious sense told them 'It is bad', but the man within them certified 'It is good'. Thus Bilwan Thakur, too, embodies the conviction of Rabindranath that what remains in the end is cordial fellow-feeling above all religious dogmas.

Yet this non-communalism, this harmony which Tagore so earnestly longs for, does not, as he emphasizes, exist in actuality. He sadly realizes 'it is not very easy to change the inborn prejudices in the minds of the Hindus and the Muslims against each other, and bring them together'.[12] But Tagore does not lose hope. He still thinks that the rivalry between the two communities can be stopped. In 1926, when he was given a reception by Dhaka University, he explained that one of the reasons for this division was poverty. He would have agreed with the words of a recent writer:

> Sectarianism, fanaticism, religious assertion or fundamentalism, by whatever name we call it, is not a purely religious phenomenon either. It is as much social … and economic as religious in nature. If a community is economically on the ascendant, it would tend to be liberal and less assertive of its religious beliefs.

> However, if a community is faced with hostile circumstances and threats to its existence, it tends to assert its religious zeal to strengthen its defenses. The rise of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism in recent years must be seen in this perspective.[13]

Tagore also stresses the importance of education. In 'Sabhyatar Sankat' he remarks: 'In the Moscow city of Russia I have seen how the spread of education has erased religious prejudices and caste-difference, how it has fostered real human relationship.'[14] Again, in *Russiar Chithi* (*Letters from Russia*) he holds: 'even in Russia there was ugly communal conflict between the Jews and the Christians, but this evil is now a thing of the past here. This has been made possible because of education.'[15] In response to a Russian student who asked him about the 'bitter quarrel' between the Hindus and the Muslims, Tagore replied:

> There was no such rivalry when I was a child … They were one in the joys and sorrows of their life. The rivalry between them that we are experiencing now has started since our national movement. The main reason for this mutual distrust is utter lack of education. The extent of education that can eliminate this mutual rivalry is yet to be introduced in our country. Which I see in your country.[16]

In short, Rabindranath's point is that education is an effective therapy to cure the disease of religious fundamentalism. For any ideology, religious or otherwise, has its root in the dark chamber of ignorance.

Another crucial way to prevent communal rivalry, as Tagore rightly thinks, is to encourage the free flow of social exchange that plays a vital role in removing all misunderstanding. In 'Hindu Musalman' he holds that nothing is more unfortunate than to make religion the only basis on which to bind people together. For religion can easily add fuel to an already dangerous tendency towards discrimination. The need of the day is for free and varied intermixing. As Tagore puts it:

> We should always meet and talk to each other on different occasions. If we go side by side, come closer, it will be easy for us to accept and respect each other as human beings, and not as Hindus or Muslims … That's why when the Muslim teachers and students used to visit Shantiniketan, we could not feel any difference from them, nor was there anything that could obstruct our relation of love, affection and friendship.[17]

To sum up, Rabindranath emphasizes economic improvement, appropiate education and unimpeded social intimacy as the means of achieving cordial human relations. His insight is that the restoration of religion to the sphere of the personal, its depoliticization, is the nettle all Hindus and Muslims must grasp to overcome the ill-feeling engendered by communalism. The way Tagore addresses the problem of communalism, explores the religious as well

as social source of it, and proposes how to come out of this impasse might surely be a lesson to us in our present situation, one still dominated by a politics of hate which often leads to communal turmoil and bloodshed, and thereby stands in the way of human solidarity.

Hindu Marriage

Like the Hindu–Muslim problem, Hindu marriage is another social problem that Tagore addresses with great sensitivity, and which illustrates once again his critical evaluation of the Hindu social system. To understand his stance on this theme we need to look briefly into the background which provoked his polemic against traditional Hindu practices. During Tagore's time, there was a remarkable social trend in Bengal. In response to the reformist zeal of Brahmo Samaj and Christian missionaries there arose among enlightened Hindus a new wave of thinkers dedicated towards preserving and nourishing ancient ideas of Hindu society. Thus there emerged the highly conservative tradition of Neo-Hinduism. As the Bengali writer Brajendra Nath Seal recounts, figures like Sasadhar Tarka Churamoni and Kumar Prasanna Sen were attempting to give a scientific foundation to the practices and ideologies of traditional Hindu religion and society.[18] The main target of Tagore's critique of the irrationality of Neo-Hinduism in his 'Hindu Marriage',[19] however, was Chandra Nath Basu, who had written two important essays, 'Hindu Wife' and 'The Proper Age and Purpose of Marriage'.[20] In 'Hindu Wife', he argued with force and conviction that Hindu marriage is the best marital institution in the world for two main reasons: first, its objective is spiritual, and secondly, in this system the wife is held in high esteem. In 'The Proper Age and Purpose of Marriage', Basu speaks strongly in favour of early marriage for its pragmatic utility in maintaining the supremacy of Hindu marriage. Tagore's 'Hindu Marriage' gets its fuel from these two writings of Chandra Nath Basu.

Basu's essays had been highly acclaimed by a famous Neo-Hindu enthusiast, Akshay Kumar Sarkar who, in one of his papers in the journal *Nabajiban*, observed:

> All the quotations used here are taken from 'The Age and Purpose of Hindu Marriage' of Chandra Nath Basu which he read at an annual function of the Sabitri Library. Those who would take the trouble of reading my essay are earnestly requested to read it once more along with my piece. Nowhere would you find such a clear explanation of Hindu marriage.[21]

In 'Hindu Marriage' Rabindranath remarks that it was this last sentence that prompted him to write that essay in response to Basu's views.[22]

In 'Hindu Wife', Basu quotes many passages from the ancient *Manu Samhita* and other Sanskrit texts to demonstrate that Hindu marriage has

profound religious and social significance. He says: 'Perhaps no one else than a Hindu has married for the sake of religion, and doing good to others.'[23] In other words, he wants to emphasize that, for Hindus, to marry means to enter into family life of the householder not for personal gratification or worldly pleasures, but in order to fulfil religious and social obligations. Basu also invokes scriptural testimony to prove how in Hindu marriage, the wife occupies a very high position, how she is treated with great honour and respect. A man is incomplete without his wife. Hence when in a Hindu wedding the bride is given away ceremonially according to Vedic rituals, to the charge of the bridegroom, and the two perform the rite of going seven paces together, the bride becomes sacred like fire, and is given the holy dignity of the wife who gives full meaning to the life of her husband. That is why the role of the wife is so glorious and ennobling in a Hindu marriage.

Basu also holds that, even before the advent of Christianity, there was respect for women in India: 'Christianity made the wife equal to man. But Hinduism instead of doing so went further. It made her the goddess of man, the object of his worship. All the gods are pleased when the woman is worshipped.'[24] It is just for this reason that Basu is against the introduction of the Western principle of equality in this country. He thinks that the movement for women's rights by modern enlightened Bengalees will not ultimately pay rich dividends. For 'a wife will gain more if her husband looks on her as his goddess rather than as his equal. One can raise one's finger against the principle of equality. But there is no such possibility of doubt, debate and conflict when one worships gods. This worship is animated by spontaneous, unquestioned love and respect.'[25]

In 'The Proper Age and Purpose of Marriage', Chandra Nath Basu draws on the system of Manu to establish that the age of the husband should be three times that of his wife. In other words, a man should have a child-wife. His argument is that in our joint-family system,

> the wife enters into relation not only with her husband, but also with all the other members of the family. She can easily learn her duties if she has relation only with her husband, and lives under his loving care. But in our joint-family system it is obligatory on her part to do her duties for the happiness of all in the family. This requires a long, difficult training which is not possible if she does not come to the family of her husband at an early age.[26]

Secondly, Basu argues, the objective of marriage in this country is complete unification of husband and wife, who thereby lose their separate identities. 'I dare to say that such a unity or admixture of husband and wife is seen nowhere [else] in the world. In our marriage the two are no longer two, they merge into one another and become one.'[27] Now, to achieve this unification, the preparation of the wife should start from an early age: 'it is only a child who can be trained to be one with her husband. Hence the great authors of our

scriptures think, the age of the wife should be far less than that of her husband.'[28]

Finally, he discounts the charge that due to early marriage the wife gives birth to a child at an immature age, with the consequent danger of both the mother and the child being physically weak. 'I cannot accept that the physical weakness of the Bengalees is due to child-marriage. At least this has not been conclusively proved.'[29] Again, he argues, the enemies of child-marriage do not see that the child-wife is meant not for those who marry only to meet their biological needs, but for those who, like our forefathers, marry for primarily spiritual reasons. So the possibility of early pregnancy is very remote.

This strong commitment to child-marriage by Chandra Nath Basu got warm support from other Neo-Hindu thinkers. Bhudev Mukopadhyaya, for example, advocates early marriage on the following ground: 'In those countries which entertain late marriage or marriage between grown-ups, we often find that bond of marriage does not last long, and that conjugal love, since it is confined to blind attachment, soon goes wrong.'[30] This does not happen in our country where the system of child-marriage ensures long, happy and unbroken marriages. Likewise, Rashiklal Sen argues that when there is marriage between two adults, the partners may, under the spell of infatuation, fail to be making a wise selection. 'Consequently, they are first separated from their parents, and subsequently from each other. This is evident from frequent divorce, adultery suits, etc. which we encounter in countries like England.'[31]

Such an attitude may sound strange to the modern, enlightened mind. That is indeed why Rabindranath wrote his stinging paper, 'Hindu Marriage', in which we find a passionate defence of modernity and an expression of an unmistakably catholic mind. Tagore holds that under the impact of Western education, we have realized that change and modification in our ways of thinking and action are urgent. Yet, due to our extreme indolence and fear of society's disapproval, we eulogize our past tradition and blindly stick to it. In order to forget our sufferings and the humiliations of everyday life, we remain immersed in traditional practices. As he puts it:

> We have neither physical courage nor mental strength to protect ourselves against injustice and humiliation. So we have to sustain the illusion of self-respect by returning to ancient wisdom. We do not dare to give up the practices which cause our humiliations; hence we remain content and indulge in self-deception by qualifying those practices as spiritual or holy.[32]

The writings of Chandra Nath Basu and his supporters on Hindu marriage are, according to Tagore, manifestations of this spurious vanity. They do not see that present-day social conditions are far different from those of the past. Under modern circumstances, it is futile to try to establish the supremacy of ancient Hindu marriage by quoting scriptural passages and recommending

them for present-day society. It is of no use to hang on to old ideas in the new milieu of a changed outlook on life.

After this general observation against Chandra Nath and his friends, Tagore takes up their contentions in detail. One important assertion of Chandra Nath is that in ancient Hindu society women had great respect and were worshipped as goddesses. He draws this conclusion from the scattered remarks in Sanskrit literature, notably *Manu Samhita*. Tagore in response points out that there is no dearth of *slokas* or verses which reveal just the opposite, namely how low was the status of women in ancient India, and how considerable was contempt for them. As he observes:

> I feel both shame and pain to quote those *slokas* from *Manu Samhita* written in utter abuse of women. I [will] only refer to [those] here where Manu explicitly states that women are solely responsible for the cardinal passions of man, viz., sex-passion, anger, greed, infatuation, vanity and envy. They have no real identity of their own.[33]

He then cites, for example, the relatively moderate fourteenth *sloka*: 'Women do not judge anything; they are eager only to have sex with a man, no matter whether old or young.'[34] Rabindranath also collects examples from the great epic *Mahabharata*, particularly from the Chapter 38 dialogue between Yudhisthira and Visma about the nature of women, all of which, he says, 'are not fit for printing'. The *sloka* he quotes is: 'If you place death, poison, snake, fire etc., on one side of a pair of scales, and women on another side, you will find that the latter are equally dreadful like the former. In fact, God has created women as the source of all evils.'[35]

Rabindranath is equally well-versed in Sanskrit literature and scripture as Chandra Nath and this enables him to pay Basu back in his own coin by giving many examples of ancient Hindu views not at all congenial to women. While Basu asserts that women are given the highest respect in Hindu scriptures and society, Tagore proves the contrary. Women were generally looked down upon in Hindu scriptures.

Tagore also rejects a further point of Basu's. According to the latter, Hindu marriage is spiritual, while Western marriage is one of contract. In response, Tagore points out that a Roman Catholic bride at the time of her marriage performs the religious rite of praying to God for her inseparable union with her husband. So why is not Western marriage 'spiritual'? Of course, he says, no marriage can be said to be exclusively 'spiritual' or 'religious' if its purpose includes the happiness and well-being of the family or oneself. But that is as true of Hindu as of Western marriages.[36]

Above all, in 'Hindu Marriage' Tagore attacks Basu's support for child-marriage. As we have seen, Basu and others take child-marriage as a reliable means of achieving complete unification between husband and wife which, according to them, constitutes the noble objective of marriage. This is

something that Tagore calls into question. First, he makes fun of the idea that married Hindus seek complete union with their partners. For what we find in actual practice is not identification but the subordination of one sex to the other – where all power and privilege belong only to the male. In fact we hear in him the voice of John Stuart Mill:

> The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now are among the chief hindrances to human improvement; … it ought to be replaced by the principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.[37]

Secondly, Tagore points out if marriage has really any noble purpose, it can be achieved only by a properly educated and enlightened wife who, as Mill again remarked, can be the best friend of her husband and inspire him with her exalted sense of truth and right, and who knows how to make a happy conjugal relationship based on mutual love, admiration and sacrifice.[38] If so, this does not augur well for child-marriage, for it is uncertain how the child-wife will take shape in the future.

Another of Tagore's objections to child-marriage is that it increases the number of widows. The longer the age-gap between husband and wife, the greater the possibility of the wife's widowhood. As he puts it:

> If by marriage, eight years is associated with twenty four years [as Basu prescribed, following *Manu Samhita*], there will be nothing to prevent their fatal and inevitable dissociation from one another. Such a long age-gap will no doubt alarmingly increase the number of widows. Chandra Nath has indeed great admiration for the widow and her stern practices. But if he is really a well-wisher of both men and women, he must have to admit that a married woman's widowhood is not at all desirable.[39]

Tagore further argues that the telos of marriage is to build up a sound family, so that strong and healthy children are essential to its purpose. This constitutes a reason that weighs against early marriage, given the evidence that the child of an immature mother is more likely than other children to be both mentally and physically less healthy.

Rabindranath's criticisms reflect his earnest desire for the harmony of conjugal life. That is why he rejects the prevalent Neo-Hindu thinking of his time, which, he thinks, is an obstacle to this harmony. He correctly realizes that the problem is one of blind addiction to traditional thought and perceptions. At the same time, however, one should note a later observation: 'Prohibition of widow-marriage and acceptance of the system of child-marriage may be harmful in many respects; but he who understands the social structure of the Hindus cannot condemn them as mere barbarism.'[40] This seems quite at odds with his earlier stance against traditional Hindu

practices. Does it mean that he eventually agreed with Chandra Nath and his allies?

The answer is no. Rabindranath does not speak in favour of these practices, let alone glorify them like Basu. He continues to believe that one cannot reasonably think of introducing these practices in the changed conditions of a more humane and open society. So the force of his contention lies elsewhere, and coheres with his wider attitude. Surely if certain practices could continue for a long period of time (like the prohibition of widow-marriage and the acceptance of child-marriage), they must have some reason behind them that is embedded in the social milieu in which they were situated. It is unfair to condemn social practices as barbaric merely because they do not tally with our present beliefs and practices. Blind adherence to them is certainly undesirable; but this does not entitle us to show disrespect to them, for they at one time served some useful purpose and contributed to the integration of society. What is therefore needed is to understand the point and logic of traditional Hindu practices in the context of the social tradition of which they formed part, and only then to start a debate as to whether and how far they are adequate to the modern situation.

Education

We have already seen both in 'Hindu and Muslim' and 'Hindu Marriage' an emphasis on education: education to terminate the rivalry between Hindus and Muslims, education to make married life more rich by enabling the wife to become a more accomplished and informed companion of her husband. Hence it is time to consider in more detail how Rabindranath regards this topic. The questions to which he devotes himself are: 'What is the aim of education?' and 'How are we to achieve it?'

The aim of education, as Rabindranath sees it, is to give one a sense of one's identity as a 'total man', and to bring education in harmony with life. A 'total man', in his opinion, is the one who thinks of himself first and foremost as a human being. What ultimately matters to him is not his birth and social status. What crucially matters to him, rather, is the conviction that he is above all a man, irrespective of his socio-economic placing, of his caste, creed and religion. To initiate one into this sense is, according to Rabindranath, the primary aim of education. The implication is that there will inevitably be social discrimination unless we are trained to think of ourselves as, before all else, human beings. We are born in a particular family, and are moulded by the customary outlook and conventions of the family to which we belong. Consequently, we tend to consider ourselves exclusively as members of our respective families, and find no other identity of our own outside of these. The child of a rich family grows up with vanity or arrogance, the child of a poor

family with shame or an inferiority complex. This creates a yawning gap between the two. Evidently what creates this distance is one's inability to regard oneself as human above all else. As a result, however educated an individual may be, he does not learn how to establish a well-balanced relation with others belonging to different social strata. So what is urgent is a training that enables discovery of one's real identity as a human being. This will enable us to realize our bond with others qua human beings, independent of any social and political differences. In the words of Tagore:

> When a child is born, he is not born already with a silver spoon in his mouth … the parents ought to have initiated their children into the fundamental sense of their being human, before bringing them up in affluence. But this does not happen. Their children learn to think of themselves as wealthy, before acknowledging their basic identity as man.[41]

To foster this sense of being human is what counts most to Tagore, and constitutes the basic aim of education. Now what is the basic identity of a human being? The answer lies in the distinction Tagore draws between human beings and non-human species. The most important distinction is this. The animal is bound within the limits of its bare necessities, while there is a 'surplus' in man which constitutes his spiritual make-up. This 'surplus' in man overflows the pragmatic need for bare necessities. It indicates a vast excess of 'wealth' in human life – a fund of emotional energy which is not regulated by self-interest. It is in this 'surplus' that we find the true identity of a person; and it is in virtue of this 'surplus' that people seek union with others beyond individual interests. The primary aim of education should be to initiate the child into his real identity qua human being so as to ensure the transcendence of egoistic impulses and thereby self-expansion through a feeling of alliance with others beyond the boundaries of social, family or religious affiliations

Now if education aims at promoting awareness of our human identity, it means that we must also recognize the role of education in those lived situations where we come into relation with others. It means that the end of education is to initiate us into how to live meaningfully vis-à-vis the people around us. In other words, it implies an intimate tie between education and life. This explains why so many of Tagore's criticisms are, as David E. Cooper says of Nietzsche's, 'aimed at the dry scholar, devoted to learning with no end beyond itself'.[42] Tagore highlights the futility of mere scholarship, of the idea entertained, for example, by J.F. Herbart, that 'to present the whole treasure of accumulated research in a concentrated form to the youthful generation, is the highest service which mankind … can render to its successors'.[43] He elevates wisdom over arid theoretical knowledge – the wisdom which, in the words of Nietzsche, 'displays itself in the applicability of its results to life'.[44] And this accounts for Tagore's contempt towards any education system whose accent

is on the sheer pursuit of knowledge with no end beyond it. In his satirical narrative 'Tota Kahini' (the tale of a parrot), he brings to light how our 'knowledge-industry' is inimical to the potential for meaningful living. In this story a minister decides that the king's beautiful songbird should be properly educated. The beak of the bird is accordingly 'stuffed with thousands of pages from thousands of books'. Eventually the bird can no longer sing, the only sound it makes being 'the dry pages of books mak[ing] a rumbling noise within its stomach': but at least the 'education of the bird has been complete'.[45] 'Tota Kahini', needless to say, is a satire on the uselessness of mere learning.

Tagore wants to make us aware of the evil of a traditional education system which encourages acquisition of inert ideas without contributing anything to significant living, an education which creates a gap between theory and practice. As he observes:

> It will be wrong to blame the students. Their academic world is on the one side, while their lived world is on another side. There is only the bridge of grammar or dictionary lying in the middle. Hence it does not come to me as a surprise when I see that the same erudite scholar highly proficient in philosophy and science also entertains at the same time many superstitions that dwarf his life, as well as poison his relation with others. For there is really an insuperable distance between his learning and life: the two do not meet.[46]

In this way Rabindranath uncovers the barrenness of a system of education devoted to dry scholarship that remains external to one's life, an education 'showered on a spot which remains far away from our life'.[47] Education should not consist of the accumulation of dry ideas; rather it should be directed to the development of our awareness of how to cope with life, how to enrich it. There must be no gap between ideas and their application to life.

What does Rabindranath intend when he insists that learning should be reflected in life, that it should equip us to live meaningfully, and to place us effectively in our lived situations? Certainly he does not want education to be seen merely as a means to a livelihood. According to him, learning becomes joyless and purely mechanical if it is looked upon only as an instrument for getting jobs and for material or financial gain.

> It is not the religion of man to remain imprisoned within the walls of necessities. No doubt we are to some extent bound by the chains of necessities; but we are also free at the same time. Our bodies occupy only a limited space, but for that reason we cannot build our house just in proportion to the space that our body can occupy. We must have enough room for our free movement; otherwise it will tell upon our health and happiness. The same is true of education. If the aim of education is only to make us fit for doing clerical or other jobs, it cannot contribute to the growth of mind.[48]

This does not, however, mean that learning has nothing to do with subsistence, only that education aims at something more than pragmatic ends. It should enable us to understand the situations in which we are placed and to adopt proper attitudes towards them. In fact education serves no real purpose in our life if it is severed from the familiar milieu in which we are rooted. It is then reduced to a completely uninteresting and mechanical process. It does not stimulate our ideas, nor does it nourish our emotions and imaginations. In the words of Tagore:

> When we find that our learning is not in tune with the way we live, that it does not depict … the social milieu we are rooted in, that it does not reflect our relation with our parents, friends, brothers and sisters … it becomes obvious to us how impotent it is to fulfil all the needs of our life.[49]

Such remarks establish that Rabindranath wants to bring education nearer to the situations we are in, to the experiences we have in our lived situations which involve our various relations with the people around us – our personal relations with our families, with our beloved ones, and our relations with our socio-political surroundings. The aim of education should be to develop and nourish our beliefs, emotions and imaginations, enabling us to assess, evaluate, and take up appropriate attitudes towards our experience in the milieu in which we live.

It is this conviction that accounts for Tagore's disapproval of a system of education which accentuates theoretical learning. It provides a plethora of information about objects and events, but this information is too inadequate to give us an understanding of how we experience things in our life. Biology, say, may give us information about hormones and glands, but it cannot capture 'my experience of sexual pleasure, the place it has in my marriage, the reaction I should have when age reduces it'.[50] To put it in a different way, there is no limit to the knowledge which our sophisticated learning may initiate us into; there are many things about birth, death, the brain or whatever that we can be enlightened about through academic learning. But even an encyclopaedic knowledge of these things will be unable to tell us anything about how we encounter them, or organize our experiences of them, what our responses to them are or should be. It cannot measure the throb of our intimate experiences of life, cannot determine the way we should look at them, the weight or value we should give to them. It is in relation to this experienced world of ours that education should endeavour to enable us to cope, by shaping our beliefs, responses and reactions. The aim of education should be to concentrate on our familiar lived world in order to equip us well for a beautiful life in harmony with our fellow beings.

The foregoing indicates something of the aim of education as Rabindranath envisages it. We now turn to his insights into the issue of how it can be

achieved. He first points out that fruitful learning is seriously hampered if it is conducted, in the traditional way, within the four walls of school buildings:

> What a terrible and cheerless situation is created for [children] by covering education with walls, shutting it with a gate, making it thorny with punishment, giving it the pressure of hurrying by the bell! … Why do we give … schools … the shape of prisons?[51]

Again, he writes that the traditional 'school is nothing but a knowledge-factory', opening and closing at set times, and churning out students with 'machine-ground knowledge' for the purpose of being examined and graded.[52]

When one reads the above passages, one is reminded of 'the history of the present' as Michel Foucault discusses it in his *Discipline and Punish*. For what Tagore says has striking similarities with the way Foucault looks at educational institutions on the model of prisons or factories, with his idea of a 'mycrophysics of power', of a disciplinary mechanism involving continuous observation or surveillance, normalization, examination, training and punishment – the whole process of discipline that 'constitutes' the individual's conduct, habits and thinking, and 'which has the function of reducing gaps' and 'imposes homogeneity'.[53] Tagore in a similar fashion saw orthodox schooling as a mechanical system. He was depressed to realize that the prevalent mode of education makes an individual only a machine-made product in a factory, instead of contributing to his humane potential. The products of a factory have a homogeneous or uniform character, but the same is not true of human beings. Each individual has a distinctive character of his own, and any education system should attend to it carefully; it should enable each individual to blossom in his own way. And this is exactly what, according to Tagore, our educational institutions overlook. They indulge in a blind, stereotyped process of instruction, and the students become helpless victims of this terrible mechanization. Just as the commodities in a factory are produced irrespective of their likes and dislikes, similarly education is imposed on children without catering to their specific needs and inclinations. Consequently education brings no message of joy and hope to them; it does not serve their individual interests and potentials.

It follows that the kind of education Tagore has in view thrives only in a spontaneous atmosphere where learning is a matter of joy, where everything sustains the learner's interests, serves his spiritual need to understand and appreciate, and provides for his mental nourishment and growth. Obviously, this cannot be achieved within the four walls of an academic institution with a monotonous, mechanical schedule. We can hope to achieve it, Tagore thinks, only in the vast expanse of nature. He says:

> The city is made only to serve the pragmatic purpose of man; it is not our natural abode. God did not intend that we should be born in the lap of brick, wood and stone, and grow there. Flowers, leaves, the sun and the moon have no impact on the city with its vocational leaning. It devours and digests us, and keeps us away from lively nature. Those who are accustomed to city-life, and are intoxicated only by the passion for work cannot feel the great loss of being alienated from nature.[54]

Here Tagore's devotion to nature provokes his despair over the 'denatured' situation of most people, and he endorses the system of education, on the model of forest hermitages, that existed in ancient India. He insists that no mind can grow properly without living in intimate communion with nature. Education in the proper sense, he says, means fulfilment of one's spiritual urge by tuning oneself to the rhythm of nature.

> When the boys are fresh in heart and soul, when they are seized with lively curiosity, when their senses are sharp and strong, just at that time allow them to play under the open sky decorated with clouds and sunshine. Don't deprive them of the warm embrace of sublime nature around them … Let the six seasons perform before them their dance, music and drama on the stage of trees and plants.[55]

It is in the midst of this serene, graceful nature that the initiation of the young should begin.

The style of education advocated here may sound rather romantic and fanciful. But Tagore's attempt to revive a tradition of education under the open sky should not be contemptuously dismissed. It is not difficult to understand that gentle breezes, sunshine, green trees and plants contribute not only to making children physically sound, but to nourishing their minds. The spectacle that nature presents to the learner with its sounds, smells and colours stimulates his imagination and power of thinking, and combats the boredom of mechanical learning.

There is another way, Tagore argues, in which nature can enrich our minds. It broadens them. Nature makes no discrimination between rich and poor, high or low. We can take lessons from it, therefore, when striving to transcend the boundaries that distance us from one another. Hence, Rabindranath's plea for the growth of liberal attitude in the learner's mind is encouraged by the vast abundance of nature.

Again, one finds, as Tagore aptly puts it, a delightful leisure in nature 'presenting itself in magnanimous and beautiful ways', and our minds, he says, require just such a leisure for their proper growth. In other words, he emphasizes that leisure has a significant role to play in the process of learning so as to make it a matter of refreshing joy. Nature palpably unfolds with its own rhythm and joy. There is no unnecessary hurry in nature. Rabindranath calls for an analogous rhythm in the life of the learner. In short, what Tagore

looks for is not mechanical learning imparted at great speed by an academic institution, but a leisurely learning that abounds with joy. And this, he holds, can be best achieved if learning starts under the open air and light, under the graceful movement of the boughs of trees resonant with the sweet melody of bird songs. (We return to Tagore's reflections on human beings' relationship to nature in Chapter 4.)

Another crucial issue concerning the method of education is that of the medium of instruction. In response to this, Tagore had no hesitation in holding that the vernacular should be the medium of instruction. This he regarded as extremely important, for the purpose of education is not fulfilled if the language in which the learner is instructed is not synchronized with his ideas and his life. If the learner has to receive his education in a foreign language, he cannot feel comfortable with it since it is not the language which he speaks with those around him in his everyday life. Further, he is compelled to spend so much time on learning the words and syntax of the language that he can make very little progress in his acquisition of other knowledge. Moreover, the learner does not find any affinity with the incidents, events and situations that form the content of most works in a foreign language; he does not find in them his familiar surroundings. Hence, he takes no interest in them, nor do they kindle his ideas. The entire process of learning becomes to him only a matter of extreme drudgery and futility. This is a process of learning without any rhyme or reason and any fruitful outcome. Hence the need, as Tagore holds, for learning in one's own language. It will enable the learner to start from the language where he is at ease, so that he does not need to fritter away his energy over foreign words, sentences and grammar. Further, as the situations that his mother tongue expresses will belong to his own life, they will evoke his interest and activate his empathetic participation in them. His mother tongue has tremendous potential, moreover, to ignite his ideas and develop his thinking and imagination so as to cope with the situations in which he is placed, indeed with the general human condition.

There is further reason behind Tagore's insistence on learning in one's mother tongue. Education should not be confined to only a few, without reaching all the people in the country. As he observes:

> When we think about the spread of education, we find that the chief impediment to it is the method of instruction not in our own language. A ship from abroad can arrive only at the quay of the town carrying foreign goods, but we cannot hope to utilize it … in every market of our country. Still if we concentrate solely on the foreign ship, our trade will be limited only to the town.[56]

Education without the medium of mother tongue will be like 'the ship from abroad', unable to spread into every corner of the country.

None of this means, of course, that Rabindranath is against the introduction of Western languages, especially English, in the education system of India.

Proficiency in English, he says, is most urgent in order to unlock a vast store of higher knowledge. Yet the reason behind his stress on the vernacular as the medium of education remains: 'If there is no scope to activate our mind from the very beginning, it loses all its dynamism.'[57] In other words, the young person must cultivate his or her thinking and imagination, and these are best stimulated by one's mother tongue. Only then will the learner be sufficiently equipped to enter into the domain of higher knowledge.

Notes

1 'Hindu Musalman', *Kalantar* (in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 15 vols, Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1961, vol. 3, pp. 366ff.
2 'Sabhyatar Sankat', *Kalantar*, p. 409.
3 Lord George Hamilton to the Viceroy, Lord Elgin, *Hamilton Correspondence*, India Office Library, C 125/2, 7 May 1897, folios 185ff. Quoted from Sarvepalli Gopal's Introduction in S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991, p. 12.
4 Quoted from Asghar Ali Engineer, 'Hindu–Muslim Relations Before and After 1947', in Gopal, *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, p. 186.
5 'Samasya', *Kalantar*, pp. 316ff.
6 'A letter to Kalidas Nag', *Kalantar*, pp. 356ff.
7 'Samasya', *Kalantar*, pp. 317ff.
8 Engineer, 'Hindu–Muslim Relations Before and After 1947', p. 181.
9 Lord Wavell to Sir A. Clow, *Transfer of Power*, vol. 8, Document 414, 7 October 1946. Quoted in Gopal, *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, p. 13.
10 *Bauthakuraanir Haat* (in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 8, pp. 1–112.
11 *Rajarshi* (in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 8, pp. 113–216.
12 'Swaraj Sadhan' ('Attainment of Freedom'), *Kalantar*, p. 339.
13 Engneer, 'Hindu–Muslim Relations Before and After 1947', p. 189.
14 'Sabhyatar Sankat', *Kalantar*, p. 408.
15 *Russiar Chithi* (in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 10, p. 687.
16 Ibid., p. 688.
17 'Hindu Musalman', *Kalantar*, p. 367.
18 See Brajendra Nath Seal, 'Neo-Hinduism', *Calcutta Review*, Calcutta, 1890–91, p. 92.
19 Tagore published his essay, 'Hindu Marriage' (in Bengali), in *Bhaarati o Baalok*, 1901. (This was the Bengali journal which he himself edited.)
20 These were 'Hindu Wife', in *Bangadarshan* (a monthly journal in Bengali; edited by Sanjib Chandra Chattopadhyaya), February 1896; and 'The proper age and purpose of marriage', in the March 1896 issue of the same journal.
21 Akshay Kumar Sarkar, 'Whether there should be widow marriage', *Naba jiban* (Bengali journal; edited by Sarkar), February 1899.
22 'Hindu Marriage'.
23 Ibid., p. 319. *Manu Samhita* (*Prescriptions of Manu*) occupies a very important place in the history of Indian ethics and law, dealing as it does with such topics as duties and virtues, the caste system, marriage and the place of women in the society.
24 Basu, 'Hindu Wife', pp. 461, 468.
25 Ibid., p. 469.
26 Ibid., p. 563.
27 Ibid., p. 566.

28 Ibid., p. 568.
29 Ibid., p. 575.
30 Bhudev Mukopadhyaya, 'Early Marriage', in *Paaribaarik Prabandha*, Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parshad, 1946, p. 5.
31 Rashiklal Sen, 'Early Marriage', in *Bhaarati* (Bengali journal; edited by Dwijendranath Thakur, later by Swarna Kumari Devi), February 1898, pp. 481–2.
32 'Hindu Marriage', p. 316.
33 Ibid., p. 320.
34 *Manu Samhita*, Dr. Manabendu Bandyopadhyaya, Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1993.
35 *Mahabharata*, ch. 38. This work was, and still is, the national poem of India as the *Iliad* is of Greece. It is the storehouse of Indian genealogy, mythology and antiquity. This epic is also the mirror of Indian culture of the time. It is difficult to ascertain the exact date of its final composition between, roughly, 400 BCE and 400 CE.
36 'Hindu Marriage', p. 329.
37 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, The Subjection of Women and Other Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.
38 Ibid.
39 'Hindu Marriage', p. 333.
40 *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 12, p. 1094.
41 *Education* (in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 11, p. 569.
42 D.E. Cooper, *Authenticity and Learning: Nietzsche's educational philosophy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 49.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 'Tota kahini', *Lipika*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 7, pp. 812–14.
46 *Education*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 11, p. 542.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., p. 537.
49 Ibid., p. 542.
50 Cooper, *Authenticity and Learning*, p. 58.
51 *Education*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 11, p. 565.
52 Ibid., p. 560.
53 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 179, 184.
54 *Education*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 11, p. 564.
55 Ibid., pp. 564–5.
56 *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 11, p. 641.
57 *Jiban smriti* (autobiography), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 10, p. 31.

CHAPTER 3

Politics, Gandhi and Nationalism

State and Society

Tagore's faith in education was not matched by one in politics. We get a glimpse of his attitude to political matters in his letter to Sir Daniel Hamilton, who had come to Calcutta in the latter half of the nineteenth century and worked untiringly for social improvement in the villages:

> We … fondly cherish the pathetic faith that the deep rooted welfare of a country can be grown chiefly on the surface soil of politics … I have not much faith in politicians where the problem is vast, needing a complete vision of the future of a country like India entangled in differences that are enormous.

Politicians, he continues, isolate politics from 'the large context of national life' and emphasize what is 'external and superficial', such as law and order. They thereby 'ignore the vital needs of the spirit of the nation'.[1]

This distaste for politics and politicians in general does not mean that Tagore was totally indifferent to contemporary political developments in India, such as the national and non-cooperation movements, or that he did not participate in the political discourse of his time. Certainly, however, his concern was more social than political, more with welfare than with political arrangements. What he cherishes most is spontaneous human concern for the reconstruction and regeneration of society. Hence his admiration for Hamilton: 'I have trust in individuals like yourself who are simple lovers of humanity, whose minds are free from race prejudice and the too loyal idolatry of the machine.'[2]

Politicians, he thought, move blindly and mechanically and lack real human sensitivity to the actual needs of life and the country. They worship 'the idols of the machine', seeking order and conformity in organization. What is more urgent, however, is to develop our creative urge as expressed in working in harness with others for the common good. 'As an animal [man] is dependent upon Nature, as a Man he is a sovereign who builds his world and rules it.'[3] Tagore's passionate call was for a harmonious society where every individual effectively participates in the collective knowledge and will. This 'heaven of freedom', based on the warmth of fellowship, is liberated from every kind of prejudice and narrowness. What gives society its life and force, therefore, cannot come from outside, in the form of the state, but must spring from the inner harmony of the society.

This priority of society over state, Tagore points out, characterizes the tradition of Indian civilization. In his response to 'The Political Philosophy of Rabindranath', by Sachindranath Sen, he remarks that, when we turn our gaze upon the history of other countries, it is the political steed that comes predominantly in view; on it seems to depend wholly the progress of the carriage. However, 'both in India and China', he says, 'the social system was always dominant, and political system stood below it. Both the countries protected themselves by the collective power of the society.'[4] It is this society, he continues, that in India has always preserved the dignity of the country by providing education, security and comforts to the people, by punishing the criminals, and by recognizing the worth of talented people. Kingdoms have risen and fallen, yet the country survived because it was self-sufficient and able to meet its people's economic and spiritual requirements. The country had always belonged to the people, while the king was only a relatively insignificant figurehead. In a politically oriented country, the heart lies in the political system: if it collapses, this means the death of the country. It is in this way that Greece and Rome met their end; but countries like India and China have survived in spite of political revolutions, since their souls are anchored in a stable society.[5]

This focus on society rather than the state is evident in his long and remarkable lecture 'Swadeshi Samaj'. This lecture emerged in the context of the intrusion of the political state under the British regime – an intrusion, he argues, that contradicted the spirit of India. Every country, Tagore says, has its own distinctive national heritage. In the West, the state plays the central role, and is the source of all strength. It takes up all the responsibilities for the welfare of its people who are, therefore, completely dependent on it for the diverse necessities of their life. In India, however, political rule and rulers have always been of little consequence for the social life of the people. The real force of the country is concentrated in the society and radiates from it. Her charities, education, trade and industry are all socially regulated. Society in India has never depended on the benevolence of kings and rulers, but has conducted its activities according to *dharmas* (duties and obligations) accepted by the people. It has functioned smoothly by allotting different assignments according to capabilities. India has been subject to different races and different kings throughout the centuries. This does not, however, diminish the autonomy of Indian society. It has always worked for its people, without allowing any interference from political rulers, and has always sustained life and freedom through cooperation among people.

It follows that the 'élan' of different civilizations is situated in different places. The vital power of a country lies in whatever it is that takes care of welfare as a whole. Any serious blow there will jeopardize the entire country. In Europe, politics or the state occupies that place, and its peoples depend upon it in almost every matter. India, however, owes its life to well-balanced

social arrangements. Thus the West survives by protecting the state, while our country lives on socially regulated conventions free from any state intervention.[6]

This accounts for Rabindranath's bitter feeling against the intrusion of the political state under British rule, and his people's absolute dependence on it. This has destroyed the sense of social responsibility in the individual and weakened the people's self-reliance. The only way out of this dismal situation is to resolve that 'each one of us, in every day of our life, shall bear the weight of our country. This is our joy, and this is our *dharma* [religious duty]. Now the time has come when we should know that we are not alone, but stand united with others'.[7] Crucial in this connection is his sympathy for the poor and the illiterate, his recognition that society should not act for one section or group, but for all, including the vast down-trodden masses of the country. In *Gitanjali* we find him saying that God is not found in the lonely dark corner of a temple, rather:

> He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust.[8]

Elsewhere he writes, in the same vein:

> They, in the fields,
> Sow seeds, cut the corn.
> They go on working.
> The Kingly sceptre breaks, the war drums
> no longer resound:
> Columns of victory gape, stupidly oblivious
> of their own meaning;
> blood-stained weapons, and blood-shot
> eyes and faces
> hide their annals in children's story books.
> They go on working …
> On the ruins of hundreds of empires they go on
> working.[9]

This speaks eloquently of his unshaken faith in the power of the lowliest to shoulder responsibility for the country. Since, in India, society has always taken precedence, Tagore is eager to instill in us the urge to reconstruct our society, where power grows out of the common people, even if this has been dislocated in the state instituted by the British.

But how is one to give substance to Tagore's faith in achieving this reconstruction and regeneration of society? We get the flavour of his response in the following observation: 'the country must be the creation of all its people … It must be the expression of all their forces of heart, mind and

will.'[10] This implies that the essential conditions for the creation of a society are great ideas, creative plans of action, emotional commitment, and the firm resolve to take up the burden of the country. These conditions require the development of mind, heart and will alike. Only then can we have power to implement our ideas and plans for the making of a brighter human world, a better society for all. Hence, when Rabindranath thinks in terms of the reconstruction of society, his emphasis is not on external, short-cut revolutionary violence; instead, he turns inwards, insisting on the awakening of the inner force of our soul. People thus awakened will develop a feeling of friendship not only towards those around them, but towards the people of the entire world. They will be like the bird 'whose wings respond untiringly to the call of the sky'.[11]

Tagore's accent on society rather than the state draws him close to the Anarchist tradition of Kropotkin, which lays emphasis on the free organization of society, and a harmony to be achieved not by obedience to the state but through free agreements among people in the society for ensuring production and consumption, and for the satisfaction of the different needs and aspirations of the people. Like the Anarchists, he envisages a society where the freedom of each is the condition for the freedom of all, where everyone emerges out of egoism to play his role in relation with others, where an individual is able to realize himself in ways that are threatened by the state, with its blind passion for strict conformity.

The reason for this suspicion of the state, which Rabindranath shares with the Anarchist, is not far to seek. *Sarkar* (state or government) is typically an effective instrument for preserving the vested interests of the few. Lust for power makes the state arrogant and indifferent to wider interests, and prompts it to retain its supremacy even by unjustified means. This, as Rabindranath thought, is clearly illustrated in the way British imperialism attempted to maintain its sway over the Indian people by adopting the divide and rule policy that separated Hindus and Muslims into hostile factions. State or government, therefore, means egoism, exclusion, compulsion and separation. Fortunately, as already underlined, the national life of India was always indifferent to the state; what was always valued here was a society based on freedom, union, love and cooperation.

Tagore pleads for a self-regulated or self-governed society where people seek to harmonize the wish for self-gratification with one for social good. The society he dreams of is the one which is self-sufficient in its material aspects and egalitarian in its spirit, which is not static with old customs and conventions, but responds to new ideas and changes. Tagore also speaks, like Kropotkin, of the idyllic village as the peg on which the entire society depends. The self-sufficient village should form the basic unit from which alone the country as a whole can develop. Rabindranath, along with Gandhi, was, therefore, critical of the British because of their part in the destruction of

the self-sufficiency of the village republic. Particularly in *Pally Prakriti* (on village community), we have a feel of his great anguish for the miserable degeneration of the village community which once used to support the entire social system:

> Once the village community was alive, and the vital force of the society used to flow from it. It was the seat of all our education and culture, religion and rituals. The great soul of the country used to find its expansion and nourishment in the villages … But now the villages are shorn of their glory'.[12]

Hence the overriding need, according to Tagore, is to attend once again to the resurrection of the village; for once our country drew its life from healthy social relations among the rural people. We cannot hope to find this social amity in a town or city: 'the social man gets its shelter only in the village.'[13]

Of course, one may doubt whether a society of the type that Rabindranath envisaged, along with the Anarchists, is possible without retaining some form of central authority, like the existing state. For men's activities may unfavourably affect other men with whom they have not entered into any personal relations, and some central authority with at least the semblance of a state seems necessary to repair the disorganization caused by such activities.

There is, however, no evidence that Tagore rejected the state in every form. What is evident is that he concentrates more on the need for a well-knit, self-governed society. In this respect he was surely prescient, for suspicion of the state and the call for small self-reliant communities able to resist the intrusions of the state are increasingly characteristic features of modern societies. Tagore would have endorsed the words of another perceptive voice of his time, C.E.M. Joad:

> There exists today a general antipathy to centralized Government with its corollary of elaborate bureaucratic administration … Men … belong to an increasing number of voluntary associations formed for different purposes, which cut right across the boundaries of the nation State … [T]his much, at least, seems clear: that the freshness and vitality of human associations, and their capacity for stimulating the individual to the fullest development of his personality, have passed away from the State, and have become the attributes of other bodies smaller in size and various in character.[14]

The Non-Cooperation Movement: Tagore versus Gandhi

One very important episode in the history of the Indian struggle for freedom was the non-cooperation movement of 1920–21, headed by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. This movement included the programme of a boycott of government schools, the demand that the people give up wearing and even burn foreign cloth, and encouragement to purchase and use only the products

of their own country. Rabindranath was a severe critic of this programme of non-cooperation with the British; consequently he was engaged in a long debate with Gandhi.

Briefly, Tagore's antipathy to the movement was as follows. First, it is quite unreasonable to boycott government schools in the absence of any alternative educational system which can impart better education. By abandoning the existing British-sponsored education, our students, as he wrote in a letter to C.F. Andrews, 'are bringing their offering of sacrifice to what? Not to a fuller education but to non-education.'[15] This reflects his conviction that, despite the strong reservations noted in Chapter 2, we cannot afford to ignore the rich treasure of Western education. Second, he is equally sceptical about the burning of foreign cloth and the introduction of the *charkha* (spinning wheel) for producing home-made products. Third, and what he feared most about the movement, was its myopic focus on the vices and sins of the British. This, he thought, would encourage a spirit of isolationism, and be antithetical to a broader view of humanity. We may now take up these points at some length, along with Gandhi's response to them.

Rabindranath resented the agenda of the non-cooperation movement to boycott government schools. This, he was convinced, was a completely negative approach, and could only result in 'the anarchy of a mere emptiness'. Non-cooperation cannot really serve the cause of education, for it emphasizes rejection of a system of education without providing a fruitful alternative to it. 'The great injury and injustice,' he says, 'which had been done to those boys who were tempted away from their career before any real provision was made, could never be made good to them.'[16] Thus the boycott can only usher in the darkness of non-education. Tagore, therefore, warns us against a merely negative enthusiasm, against the grand delusion of shunning British education. This is how he puts it:

> I remember the day, during the *Swadeshi* (freedom) movement in Bengal, when a crowd of young students came in the first floor hall of our Vichitra House. They said to me that if I would order them to leave their schools and colleges they would instantly obey. I was emphatic in my refusal to do so … The reason of my refusing to advise those students to leave their schools was because the anarchy of a mere emptiness never tempts me … I could not lightly take upon myself the tremendous responsibility of a mere negative programme which would uproot their life from its soil, however thin and poor that soil might be.[17]

Still more crucial, for Tagore, is the propensity of non-cooperation to devalue Western education. In 'Sikshar Milan' (Union of the two traditions of education), he stresses the point that dissociation from the education that the West imparts is a kind of insanity. 'Obviously,' he writes, 'to condemn the sort of learning which has made the West the monarch of Nature will be a great crime.'[18] His point is that Western education, based on science, has not only

enabled us to understand ‘this great physical universe’, but has thereby made us free from the spell of magic and enabled us to overcome natural obstacles in order to alleviate miseries and sufferings. It has created a situation favourable to the free play of thinking against all kinds of narrowness and dogmatism. Our non-cooperation with Western education means, according to Rabindranath, nothing but surrendering our greatest right – the right to reason, to judge for ourselves – and making us subject to the blind force of scriptural injunctions and social conventions.

> We have refused to cross the seas, because Manu has told us to do so. We refuse to eat with the Mussalmans, because prescribed usage is against it. In other words, we have systematically pursued a course of blind routine and habit, in which the mind of man has no place.[19]

Therefore, initiation into the education of the West will liberate us from the yoke of superstitions and stagnant conventions, from the continual deadening of our mind. Tagore recognizes that ‘the present age has powerfully been possessed by the West’ and that ‘we from the East have to come to her to learn whatever she has to teach us; for by doing so we hasten the fulfilment of this age’.[20]

As we saw in the previous chapter, this does not, however, mean that Rabindranath underestimated the educational problems of India. In ‘Sikshar Milan’, he appreciates that, while the West is mainly concerned with exploring the roots of hunger, disease and death in order to overcome them, the East concentrates on how to attain spiritual bliss and salvation. Hence what is urgent is harmony between the Indian and Western traditions of education. Western science will solve our material problems, while spiritual learning from the East will show people the way to real joy and peace. We should learn from the West to meet the requirements of the age, but the West has also something to learn from the East:

> We know that the East also has her lessons to give and she has her own responsibility of not allowing her light to be extinguished, and the time will come when the West will find leisure to realise that she has a home of hers in the East where her food is and her rest.[21]

‘I believe,’ he writes, ‘in the true meeting of the East and the West … The idea of non-cooperation unnecessarily hurts that truth.’[22]

To turn to another of Tagore’s objections to non-cooperation, he is equally critical of the policy of discarding and burning foreign cloth. In this context, he recalls with some sorrow how voices raised against this policy have been ruthlessly suppressed. ‘There was a newspaper which one day had the temerity to disapprove, in a feeble way, of the burning of cloth. The very next day, the editor was shaken out of his balance by the agitation of his readers.’[23]

This indicates how deeply Tagore felt about the blind rejection of foreign cloth, a glaring manifestation of blind obedience to some unreasoned creed. 'What is the nature of the call,' he asks, 'to do this?' Only, surely, 'a fierce joy of annihilation', 'a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation'. He argues that burning of cloth may have some point only if foreign cloth is 'impure'. But the general question whether to use or refuse cloth of a particular manufacture is, he holds, evidently not a moral one; it belongs solely to economics. Thus when the wearing of foreign cloth is considered as sin, 'economics is bundled out and a fictitious moral dictum is dragged into its place'.[24]

Tagore objects to the use of moral language in place of the language of economics. If it is wrong to wear a particular kind of cloth, it is only 'an offence against economics, hygiene, or aesthetics, but certainly not against morality'.[25] Of course, one might reply that the use of foreign cloth *is* morally wrong, for it has adversely affected the condition of our artisans. Against this, Tagore would reply that every kind of mistake may bring sorrow. A mistake in geometry may make a foundation weak, or a bridge dangerous. But mathematical systems can be cured only by mathematical methods, and not by any moral maxims. Similarly, it will be preposterous to think that whatever is wrong in the use of foreign cloth can be cured simply by condemning it as impure. Economics is again being confused with morality.

Tagore also challenges the rationale of a broader condemnation, by the non-cooperation movement, of foreign products. What mainly prompted this condemnation was the zeal for home-made cloth (*khadi*) and an economic programme focusing upon the *charkha*. 'It was our love of foreign cloth,' Gandhi observes, 'that ousted the wheel from the position of its dignity. Therefore, I consider it a sin to wear foreign cloth.'[26] The idea was that foreign mills had ruined our home industry and our material self-sufficiency in food and clothing. The British, by introducing foreign cloth, have earned large profits only at the cost our dire poverty. Hence, the need for non-cooperation with foreign cloth to insure our own economic independence and prosperity. Tagore, however, rejects the handicraft programme and, in particular Gandhi's call for the spinning wheel. 'To one and all he [Gandhi] simply says: "spin and weave, spin and weave" ': but this would only result in condemning people to mechanical and repetitive action that would deaden their minds. And mind, Rabindranath remarks, 'is no less valuable than cotton thread'.[27]

In fact, he appreciates that the root cause of poverty is 'complexly ramified'. The 'ruination of handicrafts' is only one external symptom of the process of impoverishment. An economic programme with exclusive emphasis on handicrafts to the neglect of everything else will not serve to alleviate poverty. Blind faith in the *charkha* is 'liable to succumb to the lure of short-cuts'. What is more urgent is to take a total view of the problem and think more positively in terms of a rural cooperative movement.

Finally, we must recall Tagore's deep worry that spinning is not a creative act and only serves to make a man an isolated, companionless machine completely shut off from others. To quote his inspired rhetoric at some length:

> It may be argued that spinning is also a creative act. But that is not so: for by turning its wheel man merely becomes an appendage of the *charkha*; that is to say, he does by himself what a machine might have done: he converts his living energy into a dead turning movement. The machine is solitary, because being devoid of mind, it is sufficient unto itself and knows nothing outside itself. Likewise alone is the man who confines himself to spinning, for the thread produced by his *charkha* is not for him a thread of necessary relation with others, – like the silkworm his activity is centred round himself. He becomes a machine, isolated, companionless.[28]

In general, his reaction against the non-cooperation movement springs from his vision of the grand harmony of all human races, from his desire not to see the world broken up by narrow domestic walls. If we embrace non-cooperation, we would engage in strife with the West and help to destroy the wonderful mosaic that is India. His favourite metaphor is the bird which resides not merely in its nest, but also spreads its wings in the sky. He derives from the bird the lesson of being in intimate touch with the wider span of humanity from within one's own culture. The aim of non-cooperation to alienate our hearts and minds from the West is nothing but political asceticism, a suicidal 'spirit of national vain-gloriousness' which makes us shout, 'the West has produced nothing that has an infinite value for man'. Non-cooperation, he thinks, rests on a negative narrative which overlooks the fundamental truth that man becomes great not by alienation from, but cooperation with, others.

> Man became great when he found out this law for himself, the law of cooperation. It helped him to move together, to utilise the rhythm and impetus of the world march. He at once felt that this moving together was not mechanical … It was what the metre is in poetry, which is not a mere system of enclosure for keeping ideas running away in disorder, but for vitalising them, making them indivisible in a unity of creation.[29]

What is, therefore, needed is to rise above egoism and sectionalism, and to work for harmony and cooperation between the different peoples of the earth. 'The idea of India,' Rabindranath writes, 'is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others, and which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts.'[30] 'Let India,' he stirringly concludes, 'stand for the *cooperation* of all peoples in the world. The spirit of rejection finds its support in the consciousness of separateness, the spirit of acceptance in the consciousness of unity.'[31]

It is interesting to see how Gandhi himself responded to Rabindranath on all these points. Gandhi certainly had profound respect for Tagore: 'I regard

the poet as a sentinel warning us against the approaching enemies called Bigotry, Lethargy, Intolerance, Ignorance, Inertia and other members of that brood.'[32] But he cannot agree that the non-cooperation movement has encouraged these 'enemies': on the contrary, the movement is the call of truth against dogmatism, irrationalism, ignorance and intolerance. He substantiates his point in the following way. First, with respect to the boycott of British-sponsored education, he claims that Tagore has completely misread the spirit of this non-cooperation with English studies. It is not an objection to 'English learning as such'. 'I would,' he writes, 'have our young men and young women with literary tastes to learn as much of English and other world-languages as they like and then expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and the world, like a [Jagadish Chandra] Bose … or the poet himself.'[33] So non-cooperation is not, as Tagore thinks, a movement directed against English education. It is rather a refusal to put the unnecessary strain of learning English upon people just for the sake of social prestige, or just as a passport to enter government service. It is a protest against the degradation of the vernacular, and against 'parents writing to their children, or husbands to their wives, not in their own vernaculars, but in English'. It is a firm resolve that not 'a single Indian … forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother-tongue, or … feel that he or she cannot express the best thoughts in his or her own vernacular'.[34]

In another article, 'The Poet's Anxiety', Gandhi forcefully counters Tagore's contention that the students should not have been called upon to give up government schools before they had other schools to go to. There is nothing wrong, he argues, in dispensing with government schools 'which have unmanned us', 'rendered us helpless and godless', and made us 'clerks and interpreters'.[35] It is no sin not to associate our children with a system of government which has designed its schools only to make us slaves, with no intention of making us co-partners in the rich fund of Western knowledge. Therefore, for Gandhi, the boycott of Government schools is perfectly justified, even if there are no national schools to fall back upon.

After showing his divergence from Rabindranath over the boycott of Government schools, he now takes up the issue of foreign cloth and tries to meet the charges that to look upon foreign cloth as 'impure' is to confuse economics and morality, and that the cult of the *charkha* cannot really serve any fruitful purpose. Gandhi's response, however, starts with a note of appreciation: 'To utter a *mantra* [chant] without knowing its value is unmanly. It is good, therefore, that the Poet has invited all who are slavishly *mimicking* the call of the *charkha* boldly to declare their revolt.'[36] But he adds that belief in the spinning wheel 'as the giver of the plenty' is actually the outcome of careful thinking. India's city population, he argues, has become so many agents for the big industrial houses of Europe, America and Japan, with the effect that the poor village people, who form the backbone of India, have no

work. The *charkha* will give them work and food, provided people shy away from foreign products and turn to *khadi* (home-made cloth).

Unlike Tagore, Gandhi considers it a sin to wear foreign cloth, because this deprives the Indian people of work and food. Gandhi, in effect, refuses to make any distinction between economics and morality. As he puts it:

> Thus the economics that permit one country to prey upon another are immoral. It is sinful to buy and use articles made by sweated labour. It is sinful to eat American wheat and let my neighbour the grain dealer starve for want of custom. Similarly, it is sinful for me to wear the latest finery of Regent Street, when I know that if I had but worn the things woven by the neighbouring spinners and weavers, that would have clothed me, and fed and clothed them.[37]

Gandhi further remarks that the Poet's criticism of the *charkha* should not be taken literally. He is engaging in a 'poet's licence' when imagining that he, Gandhi, wants everybody to spin the wheel to the exclusion of all other activities. This, of course, does not truly represent what he wants people to do. He prescribes only 'thirty minutes spinning' for those who have other vocations, though considerably more for the unemployed or the underemployed to supplement their slender resources. This spinning, he says, will greatly contribute to the economic self-sufficiency of the country, provided people resist the temptation to buy textiles from the West.

Gandhi insists that he is as enthusiastic as Tagore for promoting rural cooperation in such activities as the anti-malaria campaign, improved sanitation, settlement of village disputes, conservation and breeding of cattle. His only point of departure from Tagore is over the importance of the *charkha* in such activities: 'Wherever *charkha* work is fairly established, all such ameliorative activity is going on according to the capacity of the villagers and the workers concerned.'[38]

Finally, Gandhi takes issue with Tagore's perception that there is something merely negative in the din and bustle of non-cooperation. Rabindranath should anyway not be unduly alarmed, Gandhi argues, at the negative aspect of non-cooperation. The power to say 'no' is not always undesirable. Weeding is as necessary to agriculture as sowing. The refusal to cooperate with the British Government is just like this weeding process. It is a refusal to accept the system the English have established with its attendant greed and exploitation. This is not a plea for isolation from the West. Non-cooperation is not intended to erect a wall between the East and the West. In Gandhi's own words:

> I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides, and my windows to be stuffed … I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.[39]

This, as Gandhi sees it, defines the true spirit of non-cooperation which aims at 'real, honourable and voluntary co-operation based on mutual respect and trust'.[40]

These, in outline, are the differences between Rabindranath and Gandhi. The question is worth asking whether these differences are as substantial as they might seem. It is true that they have opposed outlooks. Gandhi thinks that India's fundamental problem is political, the struggle for *swaraj* or emancipation from British imperialism; while Rabindranath thinks that it is a social one, the regeneration of a self-reliant society based on fellowship and co-operation. He is afraid that a political movement like non-cooperation will isolate India from other nations and so threaten human solidarity. But this difference in outlook apart, they do not perhaps differ in their basic convictions. Gandhi, as we have seen above, is not flatly opposed to English education which, he believes, can open the door to higher knowledge. Non-cooperation is directed only against the sense of cultural inferiority induced by an education that disdains India's mother tongues. Nor does Gandhi seek alienation from the West. Indeed he insists on the harmony or convergence of East and West, but only on equal terms and on the basis of mutual respect. On all these matters, we hear the same voice as Tagore's. Both men shared the common enterprise 'of building educational institutions outside of the state-sponsored system in the colonial mould'. Both of them underlined the importance of the mother tongue in teaching and learning, and advocated a schooling in tune with India's culture.

As for the seemingly irreconcilable dispute over the *charkha*, even Tagore once conceded that 'in the products of the handloom the magic of man's living fingers finds its expression, and its hum harmonizes with the music of life'.[41] Indeed, in spite of his polemic against the *charkha* and the boycott of foreign cloth, he sometimes makes remarks that remind one of Gandhi's. There is surely a distinctly Gandhian flavour in his following observation, for example:

> So long we have blindly imitated the West even in trifling matters. Today when our country is in utter economic distress, it is time to say boldly that we should use our own products even at the cost of some of our comfort and convenience. We have to protect our little possession. A large amount of money is running out of our country to the West. Perhaps we cannot check it completely, but it will be a great crime if we do not try our utmost to resist this flow as much as we can. Every one of us should take the oath that we should use only our home-made products.[42]

Moreover, we learn from Gandhi himself that Rabindranath gladly agreed to give a talk at the invitation of Suresh Banerji, the manager of the Abhoy Ashram at Comila established for the purpose of *khaddar* development. This, according to Gandhi, showed that Tagore was not totally opposed to the *charkha* and the *khaddar* movement. Tagore's acceptance of the invitation to

speak, says Gandhi, ‘dispels … the superstition that the Poet is against the spinning-wheel and the *khaddar* movement in every shape and form’. And he goes on to quote Tagore’s own words: ‘An animal has got its fur, but man has got to spin and weave because what the animal has got, it has got once for all and ready-made. It is for man to rearrange and reshuffle for his purposes materials he finds placed before him.’[43]

So, even over the issue that most obviously divided the two men, the gulf may have been less than their rhetoric would suggest. More generally, it is fair to conclude, beneath the level of the differences in their thinking, there was a very real resonance between their fundamental positions.

The Limits of Nationalism

It is Tagore’s view that every nation should be international and resist the enticements of nationalism. He is, in fact, a severe critic of the Western notion of nationalism. The nation, as he defines it, is equated with the nation-state, a mechanical organization of people in pursuit of material aggrandizement. He replaces the idea of nation by the ideology of *Swadeshi Samaj*, of social relations that are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation, of a society where everyone is in tune with everyone else in the world. Hence the idea of internationalism that is dear to him is not the socialist or Marxist internationalism of the workers of the world uniting, but one of a spiritual kind based on the harmony of different races, creeds and religions.

Tagore had, however, been a passionate supporter of nationalism during the first decade of the twentieth century, when he had confidence in nationalist ideology as the means of cultural survival. But disillusionment came when he saw the ugly face of nationalism revealed in Japan’s deadly war of aggression against China, in Europe’s march towards the global conflict of 1914–18, and in outbursts of nationalist terrorism. This disillusionment and his consequent shift to anti-nationalism unsurprisingly angered many in the mainstream of the national movement in India. This was reflected in the editorial of a leading Bengali newspaper, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, on 5 June 1923:

> Those who are familiar with the *swadeshi* [freedom struggle] era know how much the new nationalism or patriotism of Bengal or of India owes to Rabindranath Tagore. Today, after only a few years, the same Rabindranath is putting all his force against nationalism! Perhaps the terrible destructiveness of the last World War of Europe and the ugly face of nations mutually at loggerheads, have hurt the poet’s soul. But, however much the poet’s soft and idealistic soul may be hurt … there is no denying that nationalism is a necessity for the oppressed countries like India … In the present world the effort to bind the strong and the weak by the bond of love may be nice to imagine, but it is hopeless as a practical proposition.[44]

But such reactions could not dislodge Tagore from his new stance of anti-nationalism, for he realized that nationalism was another name for appropriation, by brute force if necessary, of the wealth, and raw materials of other countries, and that nationalism would breed isolationism and violate the highest ideals of humanity.

If we turn to his literary works, we find that this fear of the unbridled violence and hatred that nationalism underpins is most effectively displayed in his novel *Char Adhyaya* (*Four Chapters*). This was written by Tagore when National Socialism was a growing force in Germany and nationalism and terrorism were flaring up in Bengal, despite the presence of Gandhi. Tagore by this time was aware of the spread of global violence linked, as he saw it, with the scientific world-view, as in the case of so-called 'distance violence', like aerial bombing, about which he raised searching questions in his travelogue *Parasye*.[45] *Char Adhyaya*, a narrative of such violence in the context of the nationalist terrorism waged against colonialism in India, tells how a group of Bengali revolutionaries begin to disintegrate under pressure from the colonial police. The novel exposes 'the psychological and moral costs of living the life of a terrorist', and ultimately 'the cultural rootlessness' of the terrorist movement. It aims to drive home how an alleged struggle for freedom in reality ushers in a new form of bondage.

Tagore's critique of terrorist violence in this novel unfolds less through the plot than through the characters and their inner struggle. The story is woven around three characters: Indranath, a revolutionary leader trained in Europe, a brilliant student of science and language with a dispassionate and ruthless temperament, competent in both armed and unarmed combat; Atindra or Atin, son of an aristocratic family, a young recruit to this revolutionary cause, and basically a poet and a lover; and Ela, an attractive girl belonging to Indranath's group who is in love with Atin.

There are four chapters in this novel each of which starts with a brief narrative to help us understand the dialogues that follow. In the first chapter, there is the dialogue between Ela and Indranath. Indranath thinks of himself as 'Krishna' in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, who inspired Arjuna to kill his kith and kin in the name of *kshatradharma* (the warrior's code of conduct). He wants to use his followers as instruments for furthering the national cause. Ela is adopted into his group for her ability to attract young men like Atin to the cause. In the second chapter, a love develops between Ela and Atin while, in the third chapter, Ela goes to the secret place where Atin is by now living a very miserable and uncomfortable life and proposes to marry him. In the final chapter, there is the ultimate encounter between Atin and Ela, when Atin tells her how he has reached this stage in his life. He then kills Ela.

The plot is simple. Atin is attracted to Ela, and this motivates him to join the revolutionary group. Under Indarnath's training, Atin grows into a successful revolutionary, but at the cost of his humanity. When Ela becomes a burden to

the group, Atin is given the responsibility of executing her. Hence, we move on, in the final chapter, to the tragic meeting between Ela and Atin, whose purpose they both understand. Ela, however, is a willing victim. Atin wants to give her an anaesthetic before executing her, but she refuses it: to die fully aware at the hands of Atin has an erotic significance for her. The last words of Ela to Atin, with which the novel ends, are: 'Let our last kiss be unending.' By then, Atin has come to realize that he has been a mere puppet in the hands of a nationalist movement fed on impersonal violence and hatred, that he has fallen from his humanity, from his self, and from his own *swadharma* (code of conduct). He also realizes that Ela is not similarly victim to the influence of this impersonal, blind violence. On the contrary, hers is a sacrifice that she has chosen out of her love for Atin. Hers is a willing, emotional submission, a glorious act of freedom. Ela's death symbolizes not only Atin's fall from selfhood, but the ultimate defeat of Indranath and his terrorist group.

Tagore reinforces the ultimate fruitlessness of nationalist revolution by referring to the confession of Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, an eminent Vedantist as well as a nationalist revolutionary, in the preface of *Char Adhyaya* (though this reference was subsequently dropped in the later editions). Tagore recounts this confession, at Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya's last meeting with him, as follows:

> I thought, having sensed my difference with him on the method of the nationalist movement, he had become hostile and contemptuous towards me … [But] one day when I was sitting alone in a third-floor room at Jorasankho, suddenly in came Upadhyaya. In our conversation we recapitulated some of the issues we had discussed earlier. After the chat he bid me goodbye and got up. He went up to the door, turned towards me and stood. Then said, 'Rabibabu, I have fallen very low' … I clearly understood that it was only to say these heart-rending words that he had come in the first place. But by then he had been caught in the web of his actions, there was no means of escape. That was my last meeting and last words with him.[46]

What is most significant about this novel is the central focus on Ela. The intention is quite clear. It is only by entering into Ela's world that Atin can come 'face to face with his own loss of humanity', as Upadhyaya did when he paid his last visit to Rabindranath. It is only in the presence of Ela that Atin can realize his fall from his *swadharma* and *svabhavadharma* (natural inclination) as a poet. Only then can he realize that he has been a puppet of Indranath's:

> The faith in one's own strength was destroyed so fully that everyone proudly agreed to mould oneself after the official ideal of the robot. When in response to the strings pulled by the leader everyone began to dance the same dance, strangely enough everyone thought it to be a dance of power. The moment the puppeteer loosened his strings, thousands became superfluous.[47]

Char Adhyaya forcefully expresses Tagore's view that political violence or violence in the name of nationalism is blind, impersonal and dehumanizing, with no concern for the autonomy and dignity of the individuals: it only makes instrumental use of them as robots for furthering its own cause.

Tagore is equally sceptical of the non-violent nationalism represented by Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, which he describes as a parochial nationalism threatening 'an isolated view of the country'. But, as already considered, there may be less substantial difference between Rabindranath and Gandhi than appears, even though they used different languages and emphasized the social and political respectively. 'Indian nationalism is not exclusive,' insists Gandhi, but 'humanitarian.' Elsewhere, he elaborates, 'Patriotism for me is the same as humanity': 'it is the narrowness, selfishness and exclusiveness, which is the bane of modern nations, which is evil'; and it is 'through the realization of the freedom of India, I hope to realize and carry on the mission of brotherhood of men'.[48] All these observations of Gandhi show his affinity with Tagore as a critic of the dominant, Western paradigm of nationalism. The only difference is that, for Rabindranath, nationalism itself becomes suspect, while for Gandhi, the ideology of nationalism is retained but invested with a new content. Gandhi's ideology of nationalism is, in effect, an ideology of patriotism, and in this patriotism there was, in the words of Asis Nandy, 'a built-in critique of nationalism and refusal to recognize the nation-state as the organizing principle of the Indian civilization and as the last word in the country's political life'.[49] The affinity with Tagore's position is surely striking.

Tagore's hostility to nationalism arises mainly from his experience of the menace of the imperialistic tendency. In his brief but well-argued book, *Nationalism*, he points out that economic interests, geographical boundaries, a common territory and heredity generally bind people into nations. But a nation, as he has learned from his experience of Western nationalism, is the aspect of a whole people as an organized power where the spirit of conflict and conquest, and not of social cooperation, gains the upper hand. A nation, he says, is a 'geographical demon' which, like a selfish individual, pursues power, wealth and importance at the cost of others. This 'demon' destroys but does not create, and fosters in people both a false pride in their own race and a hatred of others. A main impetus behind the establishment of Shantiniketan as an alternative university was this desire to expel the 'geographical demon'.

In this connection, Rabindranath adroitly distinguishes nation-state government from other forms of government in Indian history. The crux of his contention is that national government – that of the British, for example – is a mechanical, impersonal organization of power, while the texture of earlier governments in India 'was loosely woven, leaving gaps through which our own life sent its threads and imposed its designs'.[50] To put it in a different way, national government, like Big Brother in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty*

Four, seeks strict conformity for the sake of efficient management, without leaving space for individual freedom and creativity:

> Before the Nation came to rule over us [under British colonial rule] we had other governments which were foreign, and these, like all governments, had some elements of the machine in them. But the difference between them and the government by the Nation is like the difference between the hand-loom and the power-loom. In the products of the hand-loom the magic of man's living fingers finds its expression, and its hum harmonizes with the music of life. But the power-loom is relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production.[51]

'The Nation of the West,' he continues, 'forges its iron chains of organization which are the most relentless and unbreakable that have ever been manufactured in the whole history of man.'[52] This is true, he argues, not just in the case of British colonial rule, but in that of any society ruled as a nation-state. Tagore's point, then, is that in every society under the tutelage of a nation-state human values are seriously at risk; everywhere the picture is the same – selfish, mechanical organization instead of social solidarity, fierce competition instead of warm cooperation, hatred instead of love and amity, totalitarianism instead of individual freedom.

This attitude accounts for Tagore's polemic against the idea of nationalism that imbued the freedom movement in India. That idea, he says, does not belong to the traditions of India, which has 'never had a sense of nationalism'.[53] It has never been organized for political and economic aggrandizement; on the contrary, in the Indian tradition, the aim has always been human solidarity, achieved through acknowledging and accommodating differences in race and religion. India has always sought 'an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them, and yet seek some basis of unity'.[54] In other words, the ideology of India has not been a political one, but a social one transmitted through the teachings of saints like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and others. It is this social ideology, the ideology of world-community that, he believes, India has to offer to the world.

Although Rabindranath had no sympathy for nationalism, he was a patriot. This may have been difficult for his contemporaries to grasp, but, for Tagore, 'nationalism' and 'patriotism' are far from synonymous. Nationalism is a political 'demon', while patriotism means a love of one's country and commitment to its traditions which aims at social cohesion and encourages communication, consensus and fruitful interchange. This is why he criticizes Gandhi's whole-hearted devotion to politics. Gandhi's belief that politics should form the basic framework for everybody to work within is one that Tagore could not share. What he could share with Gandhi, however, was a strong antipathy towards imperialistic nationalism. This was never more evident than in his *Crisis in Civilization*, written only a few days before his death.

In the *Crisis*, he points out that India has always been open to other civilizations, particularly to Europe. Burke and Macaulay, Shakespeare and Byron had had a great impact on the Indians, who never lost their admiration for the English people even during their struggle for freedom against colonialism. Tagore appreciates, however, 'how easily those who accepted the highest truths of civilization disowned them with impunity whenever questions of national self-interest were involved'. He continues:

> While I was lost in the contemplation of the world of civilization, I could never have remotely imagined that the great ideals of humanity would end in such ruthless travesty. But today a glaring example of it stares us in the face in the utter and contemptuous indifference of a so-called civilized race to the well-being of scores of Indian people.[55]

Tagore's appreciation of what he had once been unable to imagine results in his 'gradual loss of faith in the claims of the European nations to civilization'. 'I had at one time believed that the springs of civilization would issue out of the heart of Europe,' he recalls at the very end of his life, 'but today I am about to quit the world where that hope has gone bankrupt altogether.'[56] Despite that remark, however, what remains in the end is Tagore's reassuring faith in the capacity of man to overcome self-interest in order to work for social harmony between different races and religions. 'As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man.'[57]

In this and the previous chapter we have considered Rabindranath's most important contributions to social and political debate. His was a commitment, in summary, to harmonious social relations and to the crucial role of education rather than to any political stratagem. He never gives primacy to the state over society, which explains his strong reservations towards the national movement and the political struggle to capture state power. His stress is upon the battle for the mind and the inner powers or 'soul-force' of the people, not upon a political battle which aims at replacement of one set of rulers by another. As he observes:

> Alien government in India is a chameleon. Today it comes in the guise of the Englishmen, tomorrow perhaps as some other foreigner; the next day, without abating a jot of its virulence, it may take the shape of our own countrymen. However determinedly we may try to hunt this monster of foreign dependence with outside lethal weapons, it will always elude our pursuit by changing its skin, or its colour.[58]

Tagore retains a faith in the freedom and creative ability of individuals to build a beautiful society that he never had in political power which, according

to him, seeks order and conformity and thwarts the best in individuals in the interests of dull, standardized uniformity.

Certainly Tagore participated in the political issues of his time, but even here one senses his passionate social commitment which ultimately aims at human solidarity. Solidarity, for Tagore, is a matter of imaginative identification with lives different from one's own. It is created by increasing our imaginative sensibility so as to see differences of tribe, race and religion as inessential, to explore similarities between peoples, and to ascertain how their differences may be harmonized, like the different notes in a musical whole.

Notes

1 Taken from *Samaj Chinta* (*Social Thought*) (in Bengali), ed. Satyendra nath Roy, Calcutta: Granthalaya Private Limited, 1985, pp. 246–7.
2 Ibid., p. 247.
3 *The Religion of Man*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1931, p. 27.
4 *Kalantar*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 15 vols, Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1961, p. 373.
5 Ibid.
6 Tagore's lecture on 'Swadeshi Samaj', in *Samaj Chinta*, ed. Roy, pp. 99–100.
7 Ibid., p. 106.
8 *Gitanjali*, poem xi, Calcutta: Tulikalam, 2002, p. 150.
9 *Arogya*, poem 10, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, pp. 822–3.
10 *The Mahatma and the Poet*, compiled and edited by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1999, p. 74; this, in the words of Sabyasachi, 'is a collection of letters and debates exchanged by Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore between 1915 and 1941'. I have drawn heavily on this book for materials on the controversy between Gandhi and Tagore examined in the next section.
11 Ibid., p. 86.
12 *Pally Prakriti*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 13, p. 517.
13 Ibid., p. 523.
14 C.E.M. Joad, *Introduction to Modern Political Theory*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 118–19.
15 Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 57.
16 Ibid., p. 58.
17 Ibid.
18 *Education*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 11, p. 665.
19 Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 76.
20 Ibid., p. 62.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 59.
23 Ibid., p. 78.
24 Ibid., p. 83.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 8.
27 Ibid., pp. 81–2.
28 Ibid., p. 59.
29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p. 61.
31 Ibid., p. 62.
32 Ibid., p. 88.
33 Ibid., pp. 63–4.
34 Ibid., p. 64.
35 Ibid., p. 66.
36 Ibid., p. 88.
37 Ibid., p. 90.
38 Ibid., p. 126.
39 Ibid., p. 64.
40 Ibid., p. 66.
41 *Nationalism*, reprinted Madras: Macmillan, 1985, p. 10.
42 *Pally Prakriti*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 13, p. 527.
43 Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 127.
44 Ibid., p. 29.
45 *Parasye* (*In Persia*; in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 10, pp. 747–802.
46 *Char Adhyay* (in Bengali), Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1934, preface. Cf. Asis Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath and the Politics of Self*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 21. I have made extensive use of this book.
47 Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, p. 25.
48 Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 30.
49 Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, p. 3.
50 *Nationalism*, p. 14.
51 Ibid., p. 10.
52 Ibid., pp. 15–16.
53 Ibid., p. 64.
54 Ibid., p. 59.
55 *Crisis in Civilization*, Bombay: International Book House, 1941, pp. 4–5.
56 Ibid., pp. 8, 10–11.
57 Ibid.
58 'The Call of Truth', in Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 29.

CHAPTER 4

Communion with Nature

Rabindranath on Nature

Tagore is not only concerned with the harmony of social relations, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also with people's harmony with nature, as an essential aspect of their transcending a self-centred existence. It is well to remember at the outset that he often uses 'world', 'universe' or 'earth' rather than 'nature', but generally he takes these to have a similar meaning.

Tagore's is a mind extremely responsive and sensitive to nature. Throughout his poems, songs or dramas, we meet bright sunshine, mellow evening, calm night and many other aspects of nature. His soul seems to have settled comfortably, as he says in a letter to his niece Indira Devi, in the arms of nature, without missing a particle of its light, its air, its scenery and its song.[1] He speaks of his harmony with the music of nature, with the melodies coming from the murmur of rushing water, from the songs of birds, from the rustling of leaves. He expresses an eagerness to enter deep into the great festival of nature, to see and hear nature in a consummately significant way:

> I have had many invitations to the world's festival, and thus my life has been blessed. My eyes have seen, and my ears have heard. It was my part at this feast to play upon my instruments, and I have done all I could.[2]

We find Tagore constantly extolling the beauty and splendours of nature. His songs are always there, 'where the least of a bird's notes is never missed, where the stream's babbling finds its full wisdom'.[3] Here are some examples:

> There comes the morning with the golden basket in her right hand bearing the wreath of beauty, silently to cross the earth. And there comes the evening over the lonely meadows deserted by herds, through trackless paths, carrying cool draughts of peace in her golden pitcher from the western ocean of rest.[4]

> Over the green and yellow rice fields sweep the shadows of the autumn clouds followed by the swift-chasing sun. The bees forget to sip their honey; drunken with light they foolishly hover and hum. The ducks in the islands of the river clamour in joy for nothing.[5]

It is the serene or stirring beauty of nature that constantly figures in Tagore's dreams, and he wants to paint it 'ever with love longing'. Indeed, he longs for

spiritual companionship with nature itself, for a more complete sense of identity with it. This yearning is apparent in verses like the following:

> Let me dance all day long, having kissed
> each flower bud, having hugged
> the satin-soft green corn fields.
> Let me swing on each of the waves all day long
> on the hammock of joy.[6]

> The evening air is eager with the sad music of water. Ah, it calls me out into the dusk.[7]

> My heart, with its lapping waves of song, longs to caress this green world of the sunny day.[8]

> My songs share their seats in the heart of the world with the music of the clouds and forests.[9]

Those rare and intimate moments of communion, when nature encloses his soul with its colours, sounds and odours fill the poet with infinite joy and delight:

> Ah my heart dances like a peacock
> the rain patters on the new leaves of summer,
> the tremor of the cricket's chirp troubles the shade of the tree,
> the river overflows its bank washing the village meadows.
> My heart dances.[10]

When all the strings of our life are, as it were, tuned to nature, then there arises out of this a music of joy, love and expansion of the self. It is an experience of this joy that Tagore anticipates in the following lines:

> But let there be flowering of love in the summer to come in the garden by the sea.
> Let my joy take its birth and clap its hands and dance with the surging songs, and make the morning open its eyes wide in sweet amazement.[11]

And, in this line, he expresses an experience of love: 'My heart beats her waves at the shore of the world and writes upon it her signature in tears with the words, "I love thee".'[12]

In verses like those cited, we encounter that dimension of Tagore's conception of spirituality which consists in the realization and extension of one's being in the open panorama of nature. He talks about nature as 'the most sacred place for pilgrimage', and expresses his own profound sense of intimacy with it. 'This world,' he writes, 'was living to me, intimately close to my life, permeated by a subtle touch of kinship which enhanced the value of my being.'[13]

According to Tagore, nature reveals an inner harmony within itself, among the countless different items that constitute it. As he puts it:

> There is a bond of harmony between our two eyes which makes them work in unison. Likewise there is an unbreakable continuity of relation in the physical world between heat and cold, light and darkness, motion and rest, as between the bass and treble notes of a piano. That is why opposites do not bring confusion in the universe, but harmony.[14]

Any disharmony or lack of unity that we perceive in nature is, therefore, only apparent. This is the point he makes in the following analogy with waves and the sea of which they are integral parts:

> Waves rise each to its individual height in a seeming attitude of unrelenting competition, but only up to a certain point; and thus we know of the great repose of the sea to which they are all related, and to which they must all return in a rhythm which is marvelously beautiful.[15]

It is because of this harmony that nature, in Tagore's view, is like a perfect work of art. It might be compared to a great symphony with its different constituent parts analogous to the different instruments of the orchestra that, while playing different notes, combine to produce harmonious music. For Rabindranath, nature possesses, in Clive Bell's phrase, 'significant form'. The beauty of a rose, he says, lies in its size and proportion, in the harmonious arrangement or graceful combination of its elements.[16] 'The rose,' as he says in another place, 'appears to me to be still, but because of its meter of composition it has a lyric of movement within that stillness, which is the same as the dynamic quality of a picture that has a perfect harmony. It produces a music in our consciousness by giving it a swing of motion synchronous with its own.'[17] The beauty of nature, then, lies in its significant forms and hence is able to engage our aesthetic imagination.

> Just as the spider lying at the center spreads a web around it, similarly our soul is engaged in making relations with everything centering around it. It is constantly creating a bridge between it and the other. Beauty is that bridge between man and nature.[18]

Through our sense of beauty, says Rabindranath, we realize a harmony in nature, and the more we comprehend this harmony, the more our life shares in the gladness of creation, and the more we realize our affinity with nature and experience an expansion of our consciousness.

It is clear, then, a central theme of Tagore's is the intimate kinship between human beings and nature, a kinship with moral as well aesthetic dimensions to it.

> The water does not merely cleanse his limbs, but it purifies his heart; for it touches his soul. The earth does not merely hold his body, but it gladdens his mind, for its contact is more than physical contact – it is living presence. When a man does not realize his kinship with nature, he lives in a prison-house whose walls are alien to him.[19]

When, therefore, a man realizes his identity with nature, he is emancipated from his narrow individual enclosure, and the circle of his concerns and sympathies extends to everything by which he is surrounded. A person is enjoined, then, to be fully awake to the fact that he stands in the closest relation with things around him, that the warm embrace of the morning sun, the flowing water, the fruitful earth should 'irradiate' his mind with the bond that holds man and nature together.

For Tagore, we saw, this intimate companionship with the 'limitless beauty' of nature not only fills us with joy but is a relationship of *love*. It is worth briefly elaborating on this point. The relevant concept of love, which he inherits from the great Indian seers, figures prominently in his thought, as we saw in Chapter 1. In social relations, this love, according to him, offers the only promise of redemption in times when violence and hatred prevail. It is in love, and only in that, that men and women can hope to resist the strings that pull them, puppet like, this way and that, pitting country against country, class against class, and person against person. Similarly, Tagore also speaks of the bond of love with nature. But how, more precisely, does he conceive of love? In love, Rabindranath notes, 'all the contradictions of existence merge themselves and are lost. Only in love are unity and duality not in variance. Love must be one and two at the same time.'[20] The implication of this is that there cannot be love unless, first of all, there is a genuine difference between 'the lover' and 'the object of love'. But at the same time, love also involves identification between the two: the lover tends to become one with the object, when he envelops the object into his loving consciousness, and finds his own other self in his beloved. Hence, when Tagore speaks of our love of nature, his point is that this love is at once an appreciation of the differences between man and nature and a recognition, nevertheless, of a deep unity. It is in love that one is so united with nature as to find the enlargement and meaning of one's own being. Love, therefore, whether for a beloved person or for nature, is the tie between the ego and the beyond. It is the primary mode of the extension of ego beyond itself. As Tagore succinctly puts it, 'Without this ego, what is love? And again with only this ego, how can love be possible?'[21]

Evidently, this perception of our union with nature is not a matter of mere intellectual knowledge, for it involves our imaginative ability to feel one with nature and to open out 'our being into a luminous consciousness' of everything around us with 'a radiant joy and an ever spreading love'. This point needs some clarification. Here it is helpful to consider the crucial distinction that Tagore made between 'fact' and 'truth'. 'There is *fact* on the

one side,' he writes, 'and *truth* on another side. Something as it is is a *fact*. It becomes *true* when it is experienced or felt.'[22] This means that, considered as an object of knowledge, nature is a mere 'fact' standing there quite independently of us. But nature becomes 'true' or real to us when we are involved in it. Tagore illustrates this claim with some examples. That a girl is coming out of the temple in the evening is only an unexciting fact, a mere piece of information conveying nothing to us. But it becomes 'true' when it catches our imagination or emotion, and thereby acquires a new dimension. Similarly, Tagore refers to a man who was 'just a servant' to him. One day, however, the servant came late, and on enquiry, Tagore learnt that his daughter had died. At that very moment he identified his servant not as a mere 'fact', but as a father like himself, and through this realization the servant became real to him. The point, then, is that knowledge requires distance from its object. As an item of knowledge, nature is then reduced to something to be objectively analysed. But when nature captures our imagination, this distance no longer remains; we merge with it as Rabindranath did with his servant. This, in effect, is the relation of love, and Tagore's insistence on its importance – on our imaginative and emotional involvement with the world – is central to his thinking. The following words testify to his sense of the importance of this relationship to nature in particular:

> Wherever there is a bit of colour, a note of song, a grace of form, there comes the call for love which is only a call and never a demand … There is a beauty in nature, which never insults our freedom, never raises even its little finger to make us acknowledge its sovereignty. We can absolutely ignore it and suffer no penalty in consequence. It is a call to us, but not a command. It seeks for love in us, and our love can never be had by compulsion. Compulsion is not indeed the final appeal to man, but joy is. And joy is everywhere; it is in the earth's green covering of grass, in the blue serenity of the sky, in the reckless exuberance of spring, in the severe abstinence of gray winter.[23]

Tagore's conviction is that a sense of beauty and worthiness in nature – of its 'awful loveliness', in an expression of Shelley's that he quotes – can free us from slavery to our circumscribed present and lead us from necessity to freedom, from narrowness to expanse. This conviction helps us to understand Tagore's attitude to science and technology, which are also ways of considering nature. Science, as he envisages it, tries to identify the inviolable laws of nature. When we are under the spell of science we tend to stop short at such laws, as if knowledge of them were the final end of our search. A scientistic attitude then encroaches into all areas of life. A great poem, for example, gets examined only as a system of sounds governed by rules of combination. Indeed, language as a whole, when thus considered, is revealed only as a rule-governed system. Literature is thereby reduced to the product of a complex of grammatical and semantical rules. More generally, when

cultural objects are examined, we tend to be 'interested only in the laws of the evolution of ideas, the laws of music and the forms'.[24] The same narrowly scientistic understanding extends to nature. Indeed, we tend to equate understanding nature with 'the discovery of the law of its rhythms, the measurement of expansion and contraction, movement and pause, the pursuit of its evolution of forms and characters'.[25]

Science, so considered, is concerned only with the outward, law-governed aspects or activities of nature. Rabindranath gives the example of a flower or plant. It may look beautiful, but to the resolutely scientifically-minded person, it is there only to perform a certain function and its colours and forms are also explained as contributing to this function. The plant's function, say, is to bring forth fruit, for otherwise the continuity of plant life will be threatened. The colour and smell of the plant are explained in terms of their function in attracting bees, and so on. What the scientist establishes, Rabindranath concedes, is that the activities of nature operate under rigid causal necessity. The bud develops into the flower, the flower into the fruit, the fruit into the seed, the seed into the new plant: the causal chain goes on unbroken. In and through providing such information about the processes of nature, science has not only achieved an intellectual mastery over nature, but has prepared the ground for enabling human beings to mobilize nature for their practical purposes.

It is not, for Tagore, that this resolute occupation with the search for causal links is futile or illegitimate. It is, after all, a search that may attract and satisfy our intellect. Moreover, scientific knowledge of nature is indeed a considerable achievement of the human mind. There is no doubt, then, that when we attain such knowledge, there is much that we gain. What Tagore insists upon, however, is that what we attain and gain in this way cannot be sufficient. To think otherwise is to have succumbed to a scientistic obsession with the establishment of causal laws. Undoubtedly, there are such laws to be discovered, not only in nature but also in the social and cultural spheres. But the discovery of laws, Rabindranath holds, cannot be a final aim. If, for example, we consider works of literature only as rule-governed word-formations, or as the causal products of historical processes, we have no proper access to them. Grammar is not literature, prosody is not a poem. As Tagore himself puts it:

> When we come to literature, we find that though it conforms to rules of grammar it is yet a thing of joy, it is freedom itself. The beauty of a poem is bound by strict laws, yet it transcends them. The laws are its wings, they do not keep it weighed down, they carry it to freedom. Its form is law but its spirit is beauty. Law is the first step towards freedom, and beauty is the complete liberation which stands on the pedestal of law. Beauty harmonizes in itself the limit and beyond, the law and liberty.[26]

This observation is important as a prelude to substantiating the claim of Tagore that identifying laws at work in nature is an important step towards an aesthetic and joyful relation with nature, and to a sense of being at home there. The point remains, nevertheless, that, however significant may be the discovery of laws in the rhythm of nature, 'it is like a railway station; but the station platform is not home'.[27] Science is but one stage on the journey from law to love, from necessity to freedom and expansion.

Nature, then, has two aspects. 'In nature we find the presence of law in truth, and the presence of joy in beauty.'[28] The former aspect of nature is outward or physical, under which nature is viewed as a causal mechanism to be investigated by science and harnessed by technology to meet our needs. From the technological perspective, nature is viewed through the lens of utility. Under the latter and deeper aspect, however, nature is viewed as a symbol of leisure and repose, as the perfect expression of beauty and peace. Its importance resides, not in our commercial, but in our spiritual kinship with it. Beauty, not utility, is its essential quality. The colours and sounds of nature enter into our hearts as a harmony of beauty. Nature, as Tagore poetically puts it, brings 'a love letter to the heart written in many-coloured inks'. At one level, then, nature is a slave to serve us, while at another level, it is the arena in which our being finds its expansion. From one perspective, it is only a mechanical system; while, from another, it is a harmony that 'seems to sound, as it were, like the golden strings of a harp' over the 'iron chain of cause and effect'.

We ourselves, then, may relate to nature in two very distinct ways. We may try to discover the rigid physical mechanism of nature, and use it for our practical gain, in which case our relation to it is 'external'. For something becomes our own, becomes 'internalized', only when it is a thing of joy, and not of use. It is essential, then, not to see nature as alien to us and to hear, instead, 'the welcome music of the home', to feel our place in the harmony of nature. Yet, Tagore sadly reflects, our ordinary relationship to nature is one of estrangement: we are motivated only by considerations of worldly loss and gain and fail, thereby, to realize the identity of our being with nature in the relation of joy and love. The contrast between these two ways of experiencing our relationship to nature is nicely made in the following recollection by Tagore:

> One day I was out in a boat on the Ganges. It was a beautiful evening in autumn. The sun had just set: the silence of the sky was full to the brim with ineffable peace and beauty. The vast expanse of water was without a ripple, mirroring all the changing shades of the sunset glow. Miles and miles of a desolate sandbank lay like a huge amphibious reptile of some antediluvian age, with its scales glistening in shining colours. As our boat was silently gliding by the precipitous river-bank, riddled with the nest-holes of a colony of birds, suddenly a big fish leapt up to the surface of the water and then disappeared, displaying on its

> vanishing figure all the colours of the evening sky. It drew aside for a moment the many-coloured screen behind which there was silent world full of the joy of life. It came up from the depth of its mysterious dwelling with a beautiful dancing motion and added its own music to the silent symphony of the dying day. I felt as if I had a friendly greeting from an alien world in its own language, and it touched my heart with a flash of gladness. Then suddenly the man at the helm exclaimed with a distinct note of regret, 'Ah, what a big fish!' It at once brought before his vision the picture of the fish caught and made ready for his supper. He could only look at the fish through his desire, and thus missed the whole truth.[29]

This passage also underlines that we experience two kinds of dissatisfaction. One of them is that of *not having*. We are dissatisfied when we are immersed in the whirlpool of desires and do not get enough of what we desire. But we have also another kind of dissatisfaction, which is that of *not being*. This is the pain due, not to what we have not, but to what we *are* not. It is a disquiet that arises from our feeling that our life should 'measure up' to something beyond it and from, correspondingly, a sense of 'the hollow eminence of [merely human] convention'.[30] When this disquiet haunts us, it is something we can seek to overcome by entering into a relation with nature not as exploiters, but as communers. For the voice of nature refers to something beyond ourselves, to what underlies both nature and ourselves. Nature reveals to us a realm of value beyond that determined by 'hollow' human convention. The antidote to the pain of non-being, then, is that intimate relation to nature that yields 'the highest delight, because it reveals to [a person] the deepest harmony that exists between him and his surroundings'.[31]

There are striking affinities between Rabindranath's reflections on nature and technology and those of Martin Heidegger, who equally directs our attention to the homelessness which is 'coming to be destiny of the world'. This homelessness, says Heidegger, is the product of a science and technology which reveals nature as, simply, 'a standing reserve' to be utilized by human beings. The technological 'way of revealing', as Heidegger calls it, is that of a 'setting upon' or 'challenging forth' of nature, the making of the imperialistic demand that nature should yield itself up in order to satisfy human needs. Thus, 'the earth now reveals itself as a mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit'. For Heidegger, as for Tagore, it is not that this technological way of revealing is false. But it is nonetheless 'monstrous'. For it ' drives out every other possibility of revealing': it does not, that is, allow nature to speak to us in its rich variety of aspects, and thereby precludes any realization of our deeper alliance with it. Instead we are constantly set over against nature, as it were in a master–slave relation, as we force it to our advantage. For example, 'the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command … a water power supplier', and no longer the river which once gave to the peoples living on its banks a sense of their community.[32]

Such comments clearly recall Rabindranath's own. We have already noted, for example, how intense is Tagore's concern with our present homelessness – one that is hardly surprising given that, nowadays, 'we are frantically busy making use of the forces of nature to gain more and more power. We feed and we clothe ourselves from its sources, we scramble for its riches.'[33] Like Heidegger, Tagore does not, in a Luddite spirit, simply dismiss technology – as 'the devil's work', in the German's words. Indeed, one may even see in technology 'a splendid achievement, no doubt, and a wonderful manifestation of man's masterfulness, which knows no obstacle, and has for its object the supremacy of himself over everything else'.[34] But, at the same time, Tagore, again in the manner of Heidegger, wishes to recall us to 'the power of union' with nature that, in the modern world, has been driven out by 'the power of possession'. The two philosophers both evoke a largely forgotten relation to nature that has succumbed to the domination of the technological stance, a stance which infects every aspect of contemporary life. Tagore is drawing the contrast between the forgotten attitudes and those currently prevailing when he writes:

> The man whose acquaintance with the world does not lead deeper than science leads him will never understand what it is that the man with the spiritual vision finds in these natural phenomena.[35]

This man of spiritual vision is one who has realized that 'the earth, water and light, fruits and flowers … were not merely physical phenomena to be turned to use and then left aside'.[36] What he discovers is a harmony with nature that is 'like a real home-coming into this world. It is gaining the world more than can be measured … like gaining an instrument, not merely by having it, but by producing upon it music.'[37]

In many other passages, too, we find Rabindranath refusing to belittle the achievements of science and technology, and yet at the same time asking that we go beyond these. Thus:

> When we know the world as alien to us, then its mechanical aspect takes prominence in our mind; and then we set up machines and our methods to deal with it and make as much profit as our knowledge of its mechanism allows us to do. This view of things does not play us false, for the machine has its place in this world … This aspect of truth cannot be ignored: it has to be known and mastered.[38]

But, while this aspect of truth cannot be ignored, it remains that:

> For us the highest truth of this world is not knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves in it through expansion of sympathy, not alienating us from it, and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union.[39]

Tagore goes on to argue that this spiritual union with nature, this appreciation of personal growth dependent on a harmony with nature, characterizes the very tradition of India. One thinks, for example, of how the hermitage, like the heart in our physical body, served as a vital centre in the social body of India. Again, it was in the forests that Indian civilization had its birth, a civilization encircled by vast and highly diverse areas of wilderness. Having always been in constant contact with living nature, the primary aim of the peoples of ancient India was not to extend the boundary of their material possessions. The aim was not to acquire, but to realize – 'to enlarge their consciousness by growing with and growing into their surroundings'. Even in later centuries, Tagore holds, when the primeval forests had given way to cultivated fields, and wealthy cities were springing up, Indians looked back with respect upon 'the dignity of the simple life of the forest hermitage and drew [their] best inspiration from the wisdom stored there'.[40] It is this devotion to nature that has always led Indians to hold sacred, and count as places of pilgrimage, 'all spots which display a special beauty or splendour of nature'. More generally, the traditional Indian experience has been of nature, not as a mere resource in relation to their practical ends, but as a place in which human beings cultivate and extend their spirit.

This tradition of kinship with nature is clearly reflected in Indian literature. Here, too, for example, the forest hermitage is depicted as the place where the distance between man and nature is bridged. Rabindranath brings out this aspect of Indian literature by contrasting it with the literary tradition of the West, particularly with the ways in which Shakespeare and Milton write of nature in relation to man. In their works, the natural environment indeed figures, but without being given any centrally meaningful role in the life of man. Admittedly, in Shakespeare's dramas, we find complaints against the artificial life of the king's court. Thus in *As You Like It*, we read:

> Are not these woods
> More free from peril than the envious court?

Further, in many of his plays, forest scenes have a prominent role. Yet, despite this, nature is not conceived as offering any salvation for the soul of man. Indeed, in *Cymbeline*, mountainous forests and caves appear as obstructions to human life, while in *The Tempest*, in Prospero's treatment of Ariel and Caliban, we are presented only with man's struggle against nature and his ambition to sever all connection with her. In *Macbeth*, we are introduced to a barren heath on which the three witches personify only the malignant forces of nature. None of this, Tagore stresses, is intended to undermine Shakespeare's great power as a dramatic poet, but only to highlight the dichotomy between man and nature that is portrayed in his dramas.

There is a not dissimilar portrayal of the relation between man and nature in Milton's writings. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton, it is true, describes the beauties of the Garden of Eden, where humans and animals live together in amity and peace. Yet there is no real kinship between them. Man is the lord and master of the beasts, who have been placed there only for man's benefit. Again, there is no indication that the love between the first man and woman is anything that goes beyond themselves and extends to God's other creatures – no intimation, of the kind found in Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* or in Vaishnava lyrics, that love finds its symbol in the beauty of all natural objects. Instead, Milton tells us that the garden of paradise, where the first man and woman take rest, was one where

> Bird, beast, insect or worm
> Durst enter none, such was their awe of man.

Rabindranath readily admits, of course, that there are exceptions in the Western literary tradition, such as Wordsworth and Shelley who indeed speak of an identity with nature. These are poets for whom, in Wordsworth's words, 'the world is too much with us' – for whom, that is, most of us waste most of our powers by remaining within the pragmatic horizon of getting and spending, thereby failing to see in nature anything that is *ours*. This attitude, which is exceptional in Western writings, is precisely the one that, says Rabindranath, imbues the whole classical Indian literature – for example, the works of great poets composing in the Sanskrit language, such as Kalidas, Banbhatta, and others.

In Kalidasa's poetic drama, *Shakuntala*, for instance, the hermitage plays the central role, overshadowing that of the king's palace. The hermitage, here, signifies the kinship between man and his natural surroundings. This drama opens with a hunting scene where the king, Dushyanta, is hunting an antelope. This indulgence in a blood sport symbolizes how the character of the king's life clashes with the spirit of the forest retreat, where all creatures find protection and love. The passionate appeal of the forest dwellers to the king not to pierce the deer with his arrow is really an appeal not to violate our harmony with nature. At the end of the first act, the forest itself exhorts 'the people of the hermit' to hasten to the rescue of the living spirit of the sacred forest, for Dushyanta, 'the lord of earth, whose pleasure is in hunting, has come'. Again, in the *Meghduta*, another powerful work of Kalidasa, the exiled Yaksha refuses to remain shut up within himself in his grief. The very agony of his separation from his beloved is, so to speak, extended over the woods and streams, and a dark cloud acts as the messenger to convey his love to his beloved. The longing of a love-sick man has become, one might say, a component part of the symphony of nature. Similar themes are found in the poetry of Banbhatta. Thus, when he is describing a hermitage in his

Kadambari, the main intention is to evoke our close union with nature by writing of the flowering plants as they bow to the wind, of the trees scattering their blossoms, and of the deer that caress the hermit boys with their tongues.[41]

In this section, to summarize, we have explored how Tagore conceives of nature, how he regards the harmony of nature as embracing our own being, and how he locates the spiritual kinship that he enjoins in the culture and literature of the Indian tradition. These aspects of Tagore's thinking will enable us, in the following section, to understand why, for him, it is imperative for us to care for and protect the natural world. In this respect, of course, Tagore has a very contemporary relevance, having anticipated by many years today's environmentalist preoccupations.

Why We Should Care for Nature

The environment, in the relevant sense, is the natural world – land, sea, air and the plants and animals that live on or in them. We shall now try to explicate why concern for the natural environment matters so much to Tagore, why he cannot 'bear', like John Clare, 'to see the tearing plough / Root up and steal the Forest from the poor',[42] and why he would be as dismayed at the ruthless destruction of nature as Wordsworth was at the humanly inflicted damage done to the fir trees surrounding the church at Grasmere Vale:

> … unfeeling heart
> Had he who could endure that they should fall,
> Who spared not them, nor spar'd that scymore high,
> The universal glory of the vale. [43]

Ecologists and environmentalists – so-called 'shallow' ones, at least – are primarily concerned with our treatment of the environment in terms of the pragmatic consequences this has for humans. They urge that misuse of nature will affect human beings adversely. Pollution of air and water, destruction of forests, and insensitivity to ecological balance, many of them argue, will result in global catastrophe and even threaten the prospects for human survival. In the words of one environmental thinker, Bernard E. Rollin:

> The consequences of lack of control of environmental damage can range from loss of potential benefits – such as loss of new medication derived from plants … to positive and serious harm – the dramatic rise in cancers or diseases produced by environmental despoliation of air, water or the food chain.[44]

The moral is clear: only if the environment is taken care of, and not unduly exploited, can we secure healthier, more secure lives for our own species.

Tagore is certainly not unaware of the alarming consequences of

technological exploitation, and he recognizes the misuse of nature as a terrible threat to human life. In his drama *Red Oleanders*, this awareness is voiced in the following observation by Nandini, the main female character in the play: 'The living heart of the earth gives itself up in love and life and beauty, but when you rend its bosom … you bring up the curse of its dark demon.'[45] Again, when in his play *Waterfall*, we encounter lines such as 'the Machine appears like the menacing fist of a giant', 'The Demon whose dry tongue grows and grows, like a flame of fire fed by oil', and 'it kills the music of the earth and laughs its sinister laughter, displaying its rows of steel teeth in the sky', we may read them as witnessing the extent to which industrialization and mechanization are poisoning sky, earth and water.[46]

Nevertheless, Tagore's primary concern for nature or environment is based on a different and non-utilitarian ground. While one may, of course, seek protection for the environment in the name of human survival, one may, with equal significance, seek it, as Tagore does, on the grounds that nature and man are 'adapted' to one another in the ways described in the previous section, that authentic human being is inseparably related to the flourishing of the natural world.

Tagore's form of environmental concern may be better understood by invoking, once again, his idea of *surplus*. He expresses this idea in the following way:

> The most important distinction between the animal and man is this, that the animal is very nearly bound within the limits of its necessities. But there is a vast excess of wealth in man's life, which gives him the freedom to be useless.[47]

This, however, does not mean that man is not bound by any necessities. Certainly, he has biological and other needs. But there is still a remainder or 'surplus' in human beings, once their desires, needs, and the satisfaction of these have been taken into account. For it is only man, and not animals, who is able to enquire, 'Is this all there is? Is there nothing else?' All such reflections of human beings arise because they do not live by bread alone; they experience a sense of lack even after all their biological and material needs have been provided for by technology. This feeling of lack or dissatisfaction comes from the 'surplus' in human nature, from the excess of 'wealth' in a human being's life which constitutes his or her spiritual make-up. This spiritual component transcends pragmatic need and the sphere of utility: it 'extends beyond the reservation plots of our daily life'.[48] This 'surplus' or spiritual wealth indicates an aspect of human being, 'a fund of emotional energy', which is 'useless' or 'superfluous' in the sense that it is not regulated by self-interest or practical ends.

Whether there is such a spiritual aspect to human existence has, of course, always been a matter of debate among philosophers. Certainly many

philosophers will demur if this spiritual aspect is taken, as sometimes by Rabindranath, as a yearning to listen to 'God's love call'.[49] But his notion of 'surplus' and his understanding of human spirituality can be understood and appreciated without taking them to require such controversial postulates as God or Atman. Without having to commit ourselves to disputed metaphysical doctrines, we can well concede that we have a need which is something entirely different from our everyday practical needs, one which aims at fulfilment of our creative urge, of our capacity to reflect or appreciate. It is this need that prompts us to compose poems, music and paintings, to enjoy or appreciate, in the words of Tagore, 'a beautiful face, a poem, a song, a character, a harmony of interrelated ideas'.[50] It is in these terms, and not specifically theological ones, that Tagore's idea of 'surplus' may be taken.

When so taken, the idea helps to explain why Tagore is so anxious that the natural environment be defended against unnecessary tampering and intrusion. He is drawn towards nature because its harmony evokes our aesthetic appreciation, because it gives us spiritual joy, and thus fulfils the demand of the 'surplus' or spiritual component in us. Here, then, is the main reason why we should care for nature, why it should be preserved. For, if one is sensitive to the touch of nature and finds delight in it; if one is intent on a non-technological way of relating to it – on what Heidegger terms 'dwelling' and Tagore 'home coming'; if one discovers one's being 'outside' in companionship with nature; and if one experiences love and sympathy for, and confidence in, the natural world, then one cannot but be eager to protect it against onslaught.

To be sure, this defence of the environment on broadly aesthetic grounds will not enjoy the approval of all ecologists and environmental ethicists. Some will see in it a 'speciesist' denial of the objective value of nature. For, they argue, aesthetic values are 'subjective', 'humanist' or 'anthropocentric' in character, and hence inimical to the urgent requirement of concentration on the intrinsic value of nature. Their complaint, in the words of one commentator, is that 'aesthetics … cannot form the basis of an adequate environmental philosophy without presupposing that natural processes and their products have no role to play independent of human evaluation of them in terms of their beauty'.[51] An aesthetically grounded defence of nature, as they see it, rests upon viewing nature as something that is important only because it serves to provide human beings with pleasures.

How fair is this charge of 'anthropocentrism' against Rabindranath's position? To answer this question, it is important to note that the terms 'intrinsic' and 'anthropocentric' are both ambiguous. 'An object X has intrinsic value' may be taken in at least two senses. 'X has intrinsic value' may be understood to mean that X has *non-instrumental* value; that, in other words, the value of X does not (wholly) consist in its being a means to something further. So 'X has intrinsic value' will then mean, roughly, that X

is an end in itself. This is clearly the sense in which many environmentalists consider the value of nature to be intrinsic. Failure to recognize nature's intrinsic value, as they see it, is to view nature only as instrument for serving certain human ends. Viewing it instrumentally is 'anthropocentric' in a first sense of that term. But 'X has intrinsic value' might be understood very differently: as a claim to the effect that X has 'absolute' value, where an absolute value is that which X possesses quite independently of any relation to human ends and evaluations. The denial of objective or absolute value will amount to anthropocentrism in a second sense, different from that of evaluating the world in purely instrumental terms.

Tagore's view may be regarded as an anthropocentric one in the second sense, since he thinks that no account of the value of nature, or indeed of nature itself, can be isolated from all relations to human being. Hence he observes that 'what we call nature is what is revealed to man as nature', and that 'Reality is … [that] by which we are affected, that which we express'.[52] For Tagore, to say that nature has value must involve some reference to human beings, to how they are affected by it. Mountains and lakes may be described as beautiful or graceful only in virtue of their capacity to affect us. What Tagore would deny is that there is anything pernicious in conceding this human reference. It will only seem pernicious if this human reference is wrongly taken to mean that nature, since it has no absolute or independent value, matters only for its instrumental contribution to our pleasures. In other words, Tagore's anthropocentrism will only seem pernicious if confused with anthropocentrism in a quite different sense, that of instrumentalism.

It is important as well to distinguish Tagore's anthropocentrism from the much stronger claim, made by Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, that values, aesthetic or otherwise, are 'inventions' or 'creations' of human beings. Tagore can agree with Sartre that values do not belong to the world as it is '*en-soi*', that it is 'human reality … by which value appears in the world',[53] but without thereby agreeing that these values are 'chosen' or 'imposed' on the world by human beings. After all, he might point out, one would hardly infer from the fact that things only count as loud or soft in relation to creatures who are auditorily affected by them that sounds are therefore 'imposed' or 'conferred' on the world by these creatures. In the cases of both sound and value, the innocuous thesis that these are dependent, in some sense, on human receptivity should not be conflated with the more radical and clearly questionable thesis that they are 'man-made'.

Put differently, the point we are emphasizing is that Tagore's anthropocentrism does not entail any kind of human-centred 'imperialism' or speciesist 'chauvinism'. It is not the claim that values are human artefacts or constructs, or that our evaluations always and instrumentally serve some human end. Tagore's position concerns, as it were, the conceptual analysis of value: value is an essentially relational concept, since value belongs to things

only in relation to human evaluation. And this is surely a plausible position. After all, it is difficult to understand how one could be attributing value to anything unless one could see how this thing *matters to us*, how it bears upon the context of human life. It will not, of course, follow from this relational claim either that value is merely 'subjective' and a matter of 'choice' or that things are valuable only in virtue of contributing to some practical human purpose or end. If the 'deep' ecologist's talk of intrinsic value in nature is intended to counter subjectivism and instrumentalism about values, it is perfectly in order. But if the intention is to ascribe to nature values that it possesses in isolation from how nature engages with a human sense of significance, then, for Tagore, this 'deep' ecological rhetoric is unintelligible.

Tagore's broadly aesthetic case for protecting the natural environment is certainly not an instrumentalist one. This is apparent from his discussion, reminiscent of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, of the notion of *disinterestedness*. Aesthetic pleasure and satisfaction, he writes, is 'enjoyment which is disinterested'.[54] 'Any aesthetic relation with an object,' he holds, 'is a spiritual one involving joy irrespective of any pragmatic consequence or practical advantage.' Or again, 'we cannot appreciate beauty without separating it from our desires and temptations.'[55] This disinterestedness of aesthetic contemplation is a notion that might be clarified by invoking the idea of an 'alternative world' to which we are given access by, say, a great novel.[56] While, in an obvious sense, we may be interested in the events and characters of the 'worlds' created by Proust or Dostoevsky, they are one into which we can enter only setting aside the ordinary interests and concerns – connected with our jobs and homes – that press in upon us in everyday life. Someone who reads Proust only in order to get tips on how to organize a dinner party is failing in any imaginative entry into Proust's 'world'. Indeed, that 'world' is one, arguably, that we enter into and explore precisely in order to relieve us, at least temporarily, from the pressures and involvements of our ordinary, practical pursuits.

This notion of an 'alternative world' may also be applied to nature considered as an object of aesthetic experience. The forest that engages the aesthetic imagination is not one we explore in the way that the professional botanist does, and is not to be described in the vocabulary of science. But nor is it the 'world' of the forester, the charcoal-burner and others who depend on the forest, and perceive it, as the place and source of their livelihood. It is not therefore a place to be described in pragmatic terms, as potential lumber, say, or a supplier of nuts and berries for the dinner table. When we are moved by the smell of grass, the graceful movement of the boughs of trees, the melody of bird songs, it is not nature as it objectively or actually is that we experience. Rather, this is nature as it is 'for us' – an 'alternative', or one might say a 'phenomenological', nature. It is nature, to recall another of Kant's points, that appears as if designed for our imaginative investigation. It is nature

removed from its entanglement, causal and pragmatic, with our everyday lives.

The point being made here emerges more clearly in Tagore's insistence, as noted already, on the relation of love we enter into with nature in our aesthetic contemplation of it. 'Love,' he writes, 'gives evidence to something which is outside but which intensely exists and thus stimulates the sense of our own existence.'[57] Elsewhere and in the same vein, he says that 'in my son I find my own being, I feel my own extension and joy. It is for this reason that I love my son so much.'[58] The point, here, is that when I love anyone or anything, I cannot think of seeing my beloved either in the light of any usefulness for me, or as something purely external to my being. On the contrary, I find in my beloved an extension of my being, something in 'my world' as well as the actual world. It is this relation of love, Tagore claims, that we have with nature in our aesthetic experience of it. It is in this relation of love that I am intensely aware of nature, not as an object either for detached enquiry or practical use, but as belonging to the expanded sphere of my being. It is because, and only because, it is a relation that is irreducible to an instrumental one that, as Tagore puts it, 'there is an element of [the] superfluous in our heart's relation with the world'.[59]

There are other charges, beyond that of 'anthropocentrism' or 'speciesism', that ecologists might level against Radindranath's broadly aesthetic case for caring for the natural environment. In particular, some of them will charge that aesthetic judgement is too variable, too subjective and, hence too fragile a thing on which to base a commitment to the well-being of the environment. Today it may be fashionable to enjoy the sights and sounds of unspoilt forests, but this has not always been so, and may not be tomorrow. Tagore's response to this charge would surely begin by criticizing the simplistic idea of aesthetic appreciation that it seems to assume. Such appreciation is hardly exhausted by 'enjoyment', by receiving pleasurable sensations from certain sights and sounds. (Indeed, he might add, there is, ironically, something 'instrumental' in this idea: nature is being regarded, as it were, as a resource for producing pleasures – like the River Rhine in Heidegger's example of the tourist industry.)

There is no reason to think, he would continue, that aesthetic judgement, more richly and adequately conceived, is as variable and subjective as the critics imagine. And in this connection he can appeal, once more, to the notion of disinterestedness. I may find pleasure in Indian classical music which to you may seem extremely dull and dreary. But that is no basis for concluding that aesthetic judgement is subjective unless it can be shown that you and I are judging in a disinterested and informed way, and matters are no different when one turns to the case of aesthetic appreciation of natural things. Indeed, Tagore would go further. Is it not part of what we mean in judging a piece of music or a stretch of forest to be beautiful, grand or graceful that we expect

other people, if they attend in the proper manner, to share our judgement? As Kant put it:

> Where anyone is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men.[60]

This does not, of course, guarantee that, in practice, people will all converge in their aesthetic judgements. But it does suggest that when they make efforts to appreciate works of art or natural scenes patiently, intelligently and disinterestedly, there will be much less variation in aesthetic response than the critics suppose. It suggests, for example, that we should be extremely surprised if large numbers of competent judges – and why take account of incompetent ones? – were to consider a multi-storey car park more beautiful than the Taj Mahal or the Yosemite valley. It suggests, if you will, that aesthetic appreciation is, potentially at least, grounded in sensibilities and capacities far less subject to caprice and personal bias than are our passing individual pleasures. Hence, there is no reason to think that aesthetic appreciation is a more fragile basis on which to rest a case for environmental concern than a more overtly moral one would be. After all, are there not fashions in ethics too?

With a final worry that some people might express about Tagore's position, we can be brief. This is the worry that talk of *aesthetic* appreciation of nature is anyway misguided. This sort of worry goes back at least to Hegel, who thought that the term 'aesthetic' should be restricted to discussion of the fine arts. (For Hegel, it stretches the meaning of the term to regard even gardens as objects of aesthetic appreciation.) This view, however, seems to rest either upon an arbitrary stipulation of the meaning of the word 'aesthetic' or upon a stunted understanding of what the experience of nature may offer. It is Tagore's conviction, certainly, that nature has as much to offer by way of rich and rewarding experience, by way of input to our imagination and understanding, as artworks do. Indeed, for him, it is misleading to see a dichotomy between art and nature appreciation. Admittedly, we cannot approach unspoiled nature in precisely the same ways we approach a work of art. We cannot, for example, enquire into the intentions of its maker and its fidelity to those intentions. Nor can we try to understand its significance within a particular historical tradition. Such concerns have no place in our appreciation of nature.

In other respects, however, we can approach and experience natural scenes in ways very close to those in which we do artworks. In both cases, for example, we may appreciate aspects of form and structure and hold ourselves open to sensual enjoyment. Moreover, it is easy to exaggerate the importance of the differences just noted. First, one should not conclude from

the absence of intentions behind natural scenes that all talk of their *meaning* is illegitimate. Even in the case of works of art, there are few philosophers these days who would equate their meaning with the intentions of the artist. We familiarly speak of paintings and pieces of music possessing a meaning or significance not at all intended by their creators. Now once meaning is distinguished from intention, it surely becomes legitimate to enquire into the meanings of natural phenomena. What do they indicate? What significance do they have for us? Many of the passages of Tagore's that we have quoted record experiences of nature – of budding leaves, of clouds sweeping over rice-fields – that can only be described as experiences of the significance for us of such phenomena. Second, one should not conclude from the fact that untouched nature has no cultural history, in the way the arts have, that it does not invite reflections on cultural history. For, except for literally undiscovered wildernesses, natural regions are bound to have been connected with human experience – with, as one author puts it, 'ancient and changing visions of the natural world and its relationship to human beings'.[61] In a sense, that is, a natural environment has a history, that of human beings' different ways of encountering and responding in different ages to its rocks, hills, forests and rivers. Sensitivity to the history thus attaching to natural places is not only possible but, for Tagore, a crucial dimension of what is not unreasonably described as an aesthetic perception of nature.

Notes

1 Cf. Editor's Introduction, in volume 1 of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, 3 vols, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1999.
2 *Gitanjali*, poem 16, *The English Writings*, vol. 1, p. 67.
3 *Lover's Gift*, poem 20, ibid., p. 202.
4 *Gitanjali*, poem 67, ibid., p. 66.
5 *Autumn Festival*, ibid., vol. 2, p. 134.
6 'Basundara', in the poetical work, *Sonar Tari*, Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1961, pp. 434–41.
7 *Gitanjali*, poem 74, *The English Writings*, vol. 1, p. 68.
8 *Stray Birds*, poem 259, ibid., p. 427.
9 *The Gardener*, poem 74, ibid., p. 120.
10 *Poems*, poem 20, ibid., p. 334.
11 *Lover's Gift*, poem 11, ibid., p. 198.
12 *Stray Birds*, poem 29, ibid., p. 400.
13 *The Religion of Man*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1970, p. 99.
14 *Sadhana*, *The English Writings*, vol 2, p. 316.
15 Ibid.
16 *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 354.
17 'The Religion of an Artist', *The English Writings*, vol. 3, p. 692.
18 *Pancha bhut*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 637.
19 *Sadhana*, *The English Writings*, vol. 2, p. 283.
20 Ibid., p. 324.

21 Ibid.
22 'Fact and Truth', in *Sahityer Pathe* (*On the Way to Literature*), Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1968, p. 53.
23 *Sadhana*, p. 325.
24 Ibid., p. 317.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 *Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore*, *The English Writings*, vol. 3, p. 57.
29 *Sadhana*, pp. 322–3.
30 *Lectures and Addresses*, *The English Writings*, vol. 3, p. 391.
31 *Sadhana*, p. 523.
32 'The Question Concerning Technology', in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 297.
33 *Sadhana*, p. 321.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., p. 287.
36 Ibid., p. 282.
37 *Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore*, *The English Writings*, vol. 3, p. 29.
38 *Creative Unity*, London: Macmillan, 1962, p. 312.
39 Ibid.
40 *Sadhana*, p. 281.
41 See 'The Message of the Forest', *Lectures and Addresses*, *The English Writings*, vol. 3, pp. 385–400.
42 John Clare, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. M. Williams and R. Williams, London: Methuen, 1986, p. 165.
43 William Wordsworth, *The Tuft of Primroses and Other Late Poems*, ed. J.F. Kishel, London: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 42.
44 In L. May and S. Sharratt (eds), *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994, p. 81.
45 *Red Oleanders*, *The English Writings*, vol. 2, p. 215.
46 *Waterfall*, *The English Writings*, pp. 176–7.
47 *The Religion of Man*, pp. 79–80.
48 Ibid., p. 33.
49 Ibid., p. 87.
50 'The Religion of an Artist', *The English Writings*, vol. 3, p. 691.
51 Cf. D.E. Cooper, 'Aestheticism and environmentalism', in D.E. Cooper and J.A. Palmer (eds), *Spirit of the Environment*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 101.
52 *The Religion of Man*, pp. 72, 83.
53 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Washington Square Press, 1966, p. 114.
54 *Lectures and Addresses*, p. 79.
55 *Sahitya*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, pp. 639, 759.
56 See Alan Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, Boulder, CO: Westview.
57 'The Religion of an Artist', p. 690.
58 *Panchabhut*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 14, p. 763.
59 *Lectures and Addresses*, p. 93.
60 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.C. Meredith, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928, p. 50.
61 Cooper, 'Aestheticism and environmentalism', p. 111.

CHAPTER 5

Self, Art, Evil and Harmony

Privacy and Creativity

In previous chapters, we have tried to elaborate Tagore's account of how a person expands his or her identity or 'self' through social relations and intercourse with nature. Now it is time to consider a further and final dimension of his understanding of human spirituality, one which concerns a mode of relationship to oneself whereby one moves away from the sphere of social responsibility towards that of one's own privacy. As we will see, Tagore is not holding that a person may abandon social concern. Nevertheless, he does propose that, notwithstanding relations with others, a person must also cultivate a 'space' exclusively for himself. It is this 'space' of which Rabindranath is speaking in the following lines:

> The lonely man who lies hidden in you
> Do not entangle him in worldliness.
> Let his various songs emanate from his secret chamber
> Let him stay in his own world of music.[1]

Tagore is, in effect, insisting on a dimension of subjectivity that resides in autonomous privacy. The point is explained at some length in the following passage:

> Being by nature social, some portion of our energies we must employ to keep up the flow of sociality … But [at the same time] we cannot afford to fritter away our solitude where lies the throne of the infinite. We cannot truly live for one another if we never claim the freedom to live alone, if our social duties consist in helping one another to forget that we have souls. To exhaust ourselves completely in mere efforts to give company to each other, is to cheat the world of our best, the best which is the product of the amplitude of our inner atmosphere of leisure.[2]

This mode of relationship to oneself as detached from the government of others, this mode of deep exploration of one's self, takes the form, as we might by now expect from Tagore, of striving for the realization of a certain inner harmony:

> It is within myself
> I am in search of my being
> Who roams in the shadowy land
> In different forms and guises.[3]

The question naturally arises of the exact nature of this search for 'my being', for inner harmony. Does it take the form, for example, of attempting to realize something that is already there, something that is 'given' within each of us – an 'essential' self or humanity? It is true that in early works, like *Santiniketan* and *Sadhana*, Tagore is attracted to such notions, familiar from the Upanishads, as the 'Eternal Self', 'Essential Self', or the 'Self as *Brahman*'. Here he seems to conceive of self-realization or the realization of one's inner harmony as the realization of this eternal or essential self that lies hidden within us. In a number of essays in *Santiniketan*, a passage he often quotes from the Upanishads is the following:

> The face of truth is covered by a golden disc: Oh Sun, the nourisher of everything, withhold your light thereby removing the golden cover from the face of truth. When that is removed I shall see that this resplendent Person behind is identical with the person in me.[4]

Here, the golden disc represents the phenomenal world that obscures our true self and must be removed if we are to appreciate our essential identity with the true Self, *Atman* or *Brahman*. Hence, what Rabindranath was proposing in those essays is a quest for a self-identity that underlies the realm of sensible appearance. What he sought was not the 'I' that is subject to temporality and change, but the 'I' that is eternal and changeless.

In his later philosophy, however, this idea of people possessing – or, indeed, *being* – a central, essential self is one that Tagore comes to reject. Self-exploration, self-mastery and self-realization are no longer conceived in terms of this recognition of and quest for an essential self. His attention turns from what is allegedly deep within a person to the limitless capacity that every individual has for fashioning and refashioning himself. Tagore now addresses each person as a 'great traveller' whose path is open in all directions and who is always 'on the way', with no final end or destination. Precisely because he is always 'on the way' to becoming something different, this 'great traveller' has no fixed identity. As Tagore puts it:

> O great traveller!
> Your path is open on all sides
> You have no temple, no heaven
> No ultimate end.[5]

Or again:

> I am the agent, free, initiated into the light of the day
> My every step on hard ground
> Is to transcend myself.[6]

The implication is that, not only is there no fixed, pre-given self-identity, but, if there were, no sense could given to the ideas of human agency and freedom, and of the possibility that a person has to transcend himself. A human being, to invoke Sartrean language, is what he does, is how he creates himself. He is his freedom. For Tagore, to abandon the project of self-fashioning is, in effect, to abandon one's freedom. He would surely endorse Baudelaire's injunction to recognize 'first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality'.[7] He would be equally sympathetic to Michel Foucault's call to 'separate out from … what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do or think'. For that distinction, as Foucault points out, is a precondition of 'the undefined work of freedom'.[8]

In Tagore's later writings, then, self-realization in the Upanishadic sense yields to the idea of self-realization through freedom and self-creation. Since there is no 'given' or 'essential' self, the issue of how it might be realized is one that makes no sense. Our aim can no longer be to encounter and identify with some deep and ultimate 'inner' state of ourselves, but to remain embarked on the project of self-creation, of the 'endless proliferation of freedom'. 'This way of knowing me', as Tagore said in one of his songs, 'never ends, will never end.'[9] The call here is for a space of private autonomy, one in which there is the possibility, in Rorty's words, for 'the process of fighting free of every particular inheritance in order to work out the consequence of idiosyncratic "blind impresses" '.[10] While this space requires that freedom from interference which Isaiah Berlin refers to as 'negative liberty', it also enables that self-creativity associated with a more 'positive' notion of freedom.

The question then arises of locating, within the field of human activity, the most appropriate means for securing this space, for serving as a vehicle for self-creation. It is Tagore's contention that this is to be found, primarily, not in social and political activity, but in *art*. In this respect, he belongs within a romantic tradition that sees art as an essential realm of human experience and as the authentic site for the freedom of self-expression. In a letter written to Amiya Chakraborty, he said:

> Science gives us knowledge of object. What it endeavours is to separate our personality from this knowledge. But art reveals what is inner in man. Its truth is, therefore, not empirical but personal.[11]

Here Tagore is indicating how he distinguishes between the world of science and the world of art. The former, he says, is the 'abstract world of force' which is known impersonally and dispassionately by our intellect. But the world of art is the personal world animated by our emotions, one that is an expression of our creativity through which we attempt to understand ourselves. In his words:

> [Science] has taken its special features of shape, colour and movement from the peculiar range and qualities of our perception. It is what our sense limits have specially acquired … Not only the physical and chemical forces, but man's perceptual forces are its potent factors.[12]

Science seeks to penetrate this world of physical, chemical and perceptual forces so as to give information about it. As such, it is only the objects of enquiry that are revealed, and not the human subjects that are doing the enquiring. On the other hand, there is the personal world of art: 'with our love and hatred, pleasure and pain, continually working upon it, this world becomes a part of our personality. It grows with our growth, it changes with our changes. If this world were taken away, our personality would lose its content.'[13] The world of art is, therefore, the world where human beings reveal themselves. In the creation of a work of art, a person selects 'things from his surroundings in order to make them his own. He has his forces of attraction and repulsion by which he not only piles up things outside him, but creates himself.'[14] In short, it is art that provides a private, personal space for self-expression and self-creation.

Tagore, of course, concedes that it is not only in art, but also in more practical activities – in the world of work or use – that human beings may express themselves. But self-expression as found in ordinary, mundane life, he says, is not the expression of the depth of one's being. As he writes:

> It has to be conceded that man cannot help revealing his personality, also, in the world of use. But this self-expression is not his primary object. In every day life, when we are mostly moved by our habits, we are economical in our expression; for then our soul-consciousness is at its low level … it has just volumes enough to glide on in accustomed grooves. But when our heart is fully awakened in love, or in other great emotions our personality is in its flood-tide. Then it feels the longing to express itself for the sake of expression. Then comes art, and we forget the claims of necessity, the thrift of usefulness, the spires of our temple try to kiss the stars and the notes of our music to fathom the depth of the ineffable.[15]

In and through art, this passage contends, one is brought to a region where one is free from all the habits and necessities of everyday social life, and hence is released from the constraints of the expedient and the useful. It is in artistic creativity, therefore, that one expresses oneself most fully and truly, that one exercises the capacity to create and refashion oneself in infinitely diverse ways. This is the point being made in such remarks as the following:

> Music, painting, literature reveal one deep pain in man. How can we ignore it? When it is the pain of the inner man which seeks expression in various forms, colours, melodies and dances.[16]

Or:

> What matters most is to see how man constantly expresses oneself in diverse ways in different forms in literature.[17]

This profound urge towards self-expression in art is, unsurprisingly, something that Tagore links up with his notion of *surplus*, which we have already encountered on several occasions. The most important distinction between animals and human beings, according to Tagore, is that the animal, unlike the man or woman, is very nearly bound within the limits of necessities, the greater part of its activities being those that are required for its self-preservation. In the case of human beings, however, there is a vast excess of 'wealth' in their lives, a fund of emotional energy which transcends preoccupation with their self-preservation. This surplus seeks its outlet in the creation of art as the expression of the 'wealth' and inner depth of one's being. Ordinary, literal language, which is adapted to the purposes of informing and explaining, is incapable of fully expressing this depth. What is required, instead, is 'the language of picture and music', language 'which does not merely talk, but conjures up pictures and sings'. And this means, in effect, that the expressive artist must cut 'the links that bind one's vocabulary to the vocabularies being used by one's fellow humans'.

Implicit in these remarks is the basic reason why, according to Tagore, there is such a phenomenon as art at all. Art, he explains, has its origin neither in some social purpose nor in the need to cater to a demand for aesthetic enjoyment. It owes, rather, to an impulse of expression, which, as Tagore sees it, is the basic impulse of our very being. In responding to this impulse, he says, human beings are asserting their sense of immortality in spite of the obvious fact of death. For, in artistic expression of the impulse, a person attests to his or her consciousness of an inexhaustible abundance within themselves, of an infinite dimension to their lives, in effect. It is in artistic activity, in short, that one evokes infinity, abundance, and the expansion of being beyond oneself.[18] It follows that, to be authentically human – to provide space for the exercise of that 'surplus' that distinguishes human existence – a person must reserve for himself a private space that is set apart from the social world of use. This space is, above all, that of artistic activity.

If we combine this discussion with earlier ones, especially in Chapter 2, it emerges that Rabindranath offers two rather different pictures of human beings. On the one hand, a person is a being with others. On the other hand, he is a 'private' being able to express and create his identity in solitary artistic creativity. On the one side, social life, the sphere where solidarity with others obtains, predominates; on the other side, the central dimension of a human life is that of personal autonomy and creativity. In the public sphere what takes precedence is social commitment, communal hope, the desire for

a harmonious society. In the private sphere, a person is crucially concerned to engage with his or her 'aloneness'. It seems, therefore, that there is, in Rabindranath's position, a tension, even a contradiction between two conceptions of human being. For he insists both that one's identity consists in one's relation to other human beings, and at the same time that this social identity cannot exhaust the description of a person. He is equally committed to private autonomy and communal solidarity.

If there is a tension here, it is one of which Tagore is himself fully aware. It is this tension between the public and the private, between the call of action and the call of serene contemplation and its expression in art, that is being expressed in, for example, the long poem 'Ebar phirao more' ('Turn me back'), with its theme of returning to the world of action from the 'intoxicating embrace of the Muse':

> In this world while all others are engaged all the time in a hundred avocations
> You like a truant boy freed from restraints,
> At noontide in a heath under the shadow of a tree, alone and cheerless,
> Lulled by a sluggish way-weary warm wind carrying the fragrance of remote
> forest,
> Played your flute the livelong day.
>
> Recall me now, take me to the brink of the world,
> frolicking fancy, don't keep me a-swinging in the breeze
> And in the waves, do not make me a dupe of your charming illusion
> In the shadow of the arbour of mind, secluded and deeply morose
> Do not keep me seated any more.[19]

Similarly, in one of his later poems, Tagore tells us how, sadly, his devotion to a life of poetry has been largely responsible for his failure to participate to a greater degree in the task of helping to build a 'beautiful' society in the teeth of destructive, indeed 'demonic', forces:

> I have realized within myself the man who sings
> But I have yet to realize the life-sacrificing-man.
>
> Pale, feeble, I leave now
> Undistinguished and unfulfilled
> Humbled, deprived of the knowledge of fierce manhood
> That can snatch life away from the bonds of death
> And liberate it. [20]

We should, then, consider whether this tension to which Tagore attests is one that can be resolved. Does acceptance of the 'embrace of the Muse' in solitary artistic creativity require a person to cut the social bonds that unite him with others in a social body? Does the quest for 'private' autonomy require one to abandon one's social identity? Given Tagore's own commitments

both to social solidarity and to self-expression through art, it is clear that he himself regarded the tension in question to be resolvable. The resolution might indeed be difficult, but it must nevertheless be feasible. There must exist a bridge, as it were, between social identity and personal autonomy and creativity.

That there is such a bridge is suggested by Tagore's own life, for it was one that surely illustrates the possibility of harmony between an 'outer' call and an 'inner' call. The period during which his two important books of poems, *Kheya* (1906) and *Gitanjali* (1910), were published is generally known as the period of his solitude, of his retirement from society – a time when he himself could write: 'Give me leave to depart / pardon me / I am no longer in the world of action.' Commentators speak of this period as one during which his quest for inner harmony or identity required abstinence from all social and political involvement. This, however, is misleading. The years in question were also those during which he visited problem-stricken Agartala in the district of Tripura and attended the regional conference of the Congress in Barisal (now in Bangladesh). In 1908, we find him attending a meeting in Pabna (also now in Bangladesh) to discuss problems of rural and village poverty. And throughout these years, Tagore was reflecting on the problematic issue of relations between Hindus and Muslims, reflections that resulted in works like *Hindu–Muslim* (see Chapter 2). In short, the period usually thought of as dominated by Tagore's 'private', inner quest was also one in which he retained and exercised his deep sense of social responsibility.

That sense of responsibility is especially evident from Tagore's great novel *Gora*, written between 1907 and 1910. The central theme of this book is India itself – not the India of myth or utopian vision, moreover, but the real India, a country burdened with poverty, misery and ignorance. On almost every page of the novel we are acquainted with a tireless worker, dedicated to the alleviation of these problems, who is surely intended to represent Tagore himself. And there is plenty of further evidence, during these years, of his continuing social commitment, despite the talk in his poems of wishing to abdicate from the life of action. He was, for example, involved in experiments designed to improve agricultural production within the jurisdiction of his Zemindary, and even, towards this purpose, sent his son Rathindranath abroad to train as an agronomist. In a letter of April 1908 to Abala Bose, wife of the famous scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, who was then abroad, he wrote that he, along with some enthusiastic local young men, was trying to construct new roads and water-tanks, and to clear the jungles in his locality. He went on to express the hope that after her return to India, she would find the conditions of the villages at Silaidaha (now in Bangladesh) greatly improved. Tagore also expressed his continuing social preoccupations in a letter to his son Rathindranath: 'I am thinking whether the peasants can get some training in industry, whether pottery can be treated as Cottage Industry, and whether you

can arrange a small furnace for this purpose.' And in a letter to his son-in-law Nagendranath, who was also abroad at the time, he writes: 'There is ample scope for starting a co-operative dairy in Kushtia. I am waiting for you to return.' It is abundantly clear, then, that these years, despite being ones of intense creative activity, were also ones during which Tagore was both thinking about and engaging in the reconstruction, reorganization and rejuvenation of village communities and economies.[21]

What this period of Tagore's life indicates, as indeed does his career as a whole, is that, at an existential level, there was for him no insurmountable contradiction between the search for inner harmony and social responsibility towards others. In practice, he combines both, so that it is an error to assume that one must abandon the public world of action in order to safeguard 'private' self-expression and creativity, just as it is to assume that the latter must be eschewed by 'the man of action'. Indeed, Tagore would go further and argue that a sense of social obligation is intimately tied to a sense of what is central to one's self-development and self-cultivation. He would surely agree with Richard Rorty that 'unless there is some interesting connection between what matters most to an individual and her purported moral obligations to our fellow human beings, she has no such obligations'.[22]

But does it not remain, at a theoretical level, that there is an irresolvable tension between the justification for social or moral commitment to others and one for the pursuit of personal autonomy and self-creation? Here, it is important to recall what was said in Chapter 1 to the effect that Tagore did not endorse the ambitions that, in recent centuries, we have come to associate with the term 'philosophy'. In particular, he is not concerned with, and would in fact reject the very possibility of, providing final justifications of the kind just mentioned. Hence the issue of their coming into irresolvable conflict cannot even arise. In rejecting the possibility of establishing a final justification for social and moral obligations to others, Tagore is not denying the existence of such obligations. The point, rather, is to deny the availability of any rational, philosophical ground for them. There is, for example, no rule of reason, like Kant's categorical imperative, that entails the sacrifice of one's own personal interests to the well-being of others. If philosophy is supposed to establish such rules and thereby ground our obligations, then, for Tagore, philosophy should be abandoned. In his view, it is enough that, as a matter of fact, we do possess a sense of community or solidarity, and that we do experience sympathy and compassion for others. It is neither possible nor necessary to establish a theoretical foundation for this sense and experience. 'One can want,' as Rorty puts it, 'to relieve suffering without having any interesting answer' to the question of why one should want this.[23] Tagore would agree.

Equivalent remarks could be made about the search for personal autonomy and self-expression. That there is no final, rational justification for that search

does not impugn it. At the theoretical or philosophical level, then, there can be no tension between the grounds for a life of social commitment and those for 'private' engagement in artistic self-expression. At the practical or existential level, however, it is a tension that can, as in Tagore's own life, be resolved. During those years on which we focused a few paragraphs earlier, after all, Tagore succeeded in combining actual engagement in social activity with using that very engagement as the material for his poetic reflections and creations. It would be hard to think of many more striking examples of a unity between social commitment and 'private' self-expression that, while hard to achieve, is nevertheless achievable.

The Prospects for Harmony

It is evident from the preceding discussion, and indeed from this whole book, that the central aspiration of Rabindranath is one for harmony. Some readers are bound to question how realistic this aspiration is. How aware was Tagore of the many obstacles – evil, sorrow, suffering, disease, death and so on – which threaten any ideal of harmonious existence? What, these readers may ask, would be his response, for example, to Baudelaire, who expresses the conviction that there is no harmony to be found in the world? For Baudelaire, as we have already seen, almost everything is ugly and abominable. His heart, unlike Tagore's, emphatically does *not* dance when the rain patters on the new leaves of summer: rather, 'the rain spreading its immense trails / Imitates a prison of bars'. For Baudelaire, the sky is not blue, but black as pitch:

> Can you illuminate a grimy, black sky? Can we pierce
> shadows denser
> than pitch, with no morning or evening, with no stars, without
> even gloomy
> flashes of lightning? Can you illuminate grimy black
> sky? … The devil has
> snuffed the light at the windows of the Inn.

Baudelaire's world is 'an enormous corpse' which we live upon like worms and parasites whose squirmings will soon cease. This is why, in his poem 'The Voyage', his intense craving is for 'Anywhere! Anywhere! As long as it be out of the world.' If there is anything beautiful, it is not to be found in this world. Addressing the figure of death, Baudelaire declaims, 'This country bores, O Death! Let us set sail.' The new land to which he will sail may turn out to be as ugly as the one he is leaving, but no matter: the immediate goal is not the destination, but to get away from a world he finds abominable.

To drive into the gulf, Hell or Heaven …
What matter? Into the unknown in search of the new.[24]

Clearly Rabindranath's perception of the world was entirely different from Baudelaire's. In his writings, we encounter no longing to escape the world, but instead the love of a world that he had found beautiful ever since childhood: 'I don't want to leave this beautiful world / I want to live among men.'[25] And this love never waned, it seems, even for a moment. The worry may then be that Tagore simply refused to recognize the ugliness and disharmony that, at some level, he must nevertheless have been familiar with – or perhaps that, while recognizing them, he chose simply to ignore them. Tagore himself was well aware of this worry on the part of his readers, such as W.B. Yeats once his initial enthusiasm for *Gitanjali*, in particular (see Chapter 1), had subsided. Rabindranath observes in the preface of his poetical work *Chitra*: 'It is said against me that I have attended only to beauty or harmony, while anything contrary to it [has always escaped my notice].'[26] He considered this charge to be an unfair one, and in this he was surely justified. It is certainly not true that he failed to recognize or refused to accept the existence of evil, ugliness and other aspects of life antithetical to harmony. His poetical works conspicuously testify to such a recognition and acceptance.

In *Kadi o Komal*, which was published after the death of his sister-in-law, Kadambari Devi, we encounter a poignant expression of his shocking experience of death. Here we find him searching in the darkness of night for bright sunshine, but all in vain:

Oh! where is the luminous world!
Where I can move without fear!

The poet receives no answer to his questions.

Who will respond to the call of the heart?
The night is mute.[27]

In *Manasi*, especially in the poems 'Nishthur Srishti' and 'Shunya Grihe', we encounter similar expressions of despair, the feeling that our life is without any hope, that suffering alone is real. In *Sonar Tari*, particularly the poem 'Niruddesh Jatra', dejection and disillusion seem to be even more pronounced. Indeed, the poem reminds one of Baudelaire's 'The Voyage', with its fear that our faith in the boatman to take us to the shore of a bright new land amidst storms and darkness has no real ground:

Dense blue water full of apprehension,
Nowhere is found any shore,
Infinite wailing pervades the world.[28]

Elsewhere, vivid expression is lent to the tensions between a desire for good and beauty, and inevitable dejection in the face of brutal wars, and the consequent horrors of death and suffering, and between a craving for harmony, and the palpable lack of it in the actual world.

> How much sorrows and sufferings!
> How many battles and death! No end to them.
> Gradually darkness becomes denser,
> Silence more intense … From the depth
> Of the solitary earth arises a distressed question,
> A wearied tone: How long?[29]

Poem 37 in *Balaka* provides an especially telling demonstration of Tagore's acute sense of evil, of his grim awareness that 'the clouds have blotted away the stars':

> Do you hear the tumult of death afar,
> The call midst the fire-floods and poisonous clouds …
> All the black evils in the world have overflowed their banks,
> Yet, oarsmen, take your places with the blessing of sorrows in your souls!
> Whom do you blame, brothers? Bow your heads down!
> The sin has been yours and ours.
> The heat growing in the heart of God for ages –
> The cowardice of the weak, the arrogance of the strong, the greed
> Of fat prosperity, the rancour of the wronged, pride of race, and insult to man –
> Has burst God's peace, raging in storm.[30]

It is especially in the final phase of his poetic writings, which corresponded to the worsening political situation both at home and abroad, that Tagore's awareness of evil in the world and his fears for the prospects of harmony is acute and explicit. In some of these poems, he gives voice to feelings akin to the 'leaden-eyed despair' of which Keats writes in his 'Ode to a nightingale'. For example, in a poem significantly titled 'This evil day', Rabindranath describes a world which is wild with the delirium of hatred and conflict, one which has gone crooked and is taken over by greed. Here is how Tagore expresses his anguished perception of this world:

> Have I not seen secret malignance strike down the helpless under the cover of
> hypercritical night?
> Have I not heard the silenced voice of Justice weeping in solitude at night's
> defiant outrages?
> Have I not seen in what agony reckless youth, running mad, has vainly
> shattered its life against insensitive rocks?
> Choked is my voice, mute are my songs.[31]

It is evident, then, that Tagore fully recognizes the existence of evil in the world, and not as some accidental accompaniment to our life, but as something

pervasive and central to it. Even during his darkest periods, however, Tagore is able to translate his moments of despair into ones of hope. This becomes clear, for example, in poem 19 of *Balaka*. While appreciating that life is indeed haunted by the prospect of death, always there to upset the flow of life, he describes how, nevertheless, he has 'kissed this world' with his eyes and limbs, has wrapped it within his heart 'in numberless folds', and how he still loves his life 'because I love the light of the sky so enwoven with me'. To be sure, despite this love of life, he knows that he will have to die one day, that his eyes will no longer see light, that his heart will no longer respond to the warm call of the sun. But, he adds, the final truth is not this seemingly terrible contradiction between life and death:

> If to leave this world be as real as to love it – then there must be a meaning in the meeting and the parting of life.
> If that love were deceived in death, then the canker of this deceit would eat into all things, and the stars would shrivel and grow black.[32]

What is attested to, in these words, is the conviction that, at a deep level, there is a harmony that enables reconciliation between life and death. More generally, Tagore's writings attest to the belief that the existence and experience of evil cannot override our faith in beauty, goodness and harmony.

Far from ignoring evil, Tagore is at some pains to classify the various forms of evil. Evils, according to him, are of two general kinds: natural and moral. Natural evils are those which are caused by natural or physical factors, while moral evils are those that spring directly or indirectly from the exercise of human will. Evils of the first kind are subsumed under the headings of 'suffering' or 'pain', and those of the second kind under the heading of 'sin'. 'The evil which hurts the natural man is pain, but that which hurts his soul has been given a special name, it is sin.'[33] Familiar examples of natural evil are poverty, disease, death and privation; while falsehood and selfishness, for instance, are identified as moral evils. Tagore also speaks of ugliness as an evil, since to tolerate ugliness is to be without that aesthetic sense which, we know, is such a central aspect, for Tagore, of a worthwhile human life. Ugliness, like selfishness, serves to confine a person, to prevent that expansion of consciousness and selfhood that should be a primary aim of an authentic human life.

What matters most, for our present purposes, is not Tagore's catalogue of the various kinds of evil, but the question of how he responds to the existence of evil. It is interesting and useful, in this context, to compare Tagore's position with that of Keats. The English poet, as we know, is not only a worshipper of beauty, but famously equates beauty with truth. To preserve this equation, he had to narrow down the domain of truth by ignoring or marginalizing the types of truths or facts which could hardly be objects for the

contemplation of beauty. On several occasions Tagore expressed his appreciation of Keats's equation, but it is one that he appropriates in his own distinctive way. Unlike Keats, he is not willing to exclude anything belonging in the domain of truth, not even – and especially – the dark fact of death. For Tagore, there need not, and should not, be anything morbid in concentrating upon death. Indeed, for him, it is a symptom of true morbidity simply to ignore death, to treat it as an inconvenient and disagreeable subject that sensible people set aside. Tagore would doubtless agree with Heidegger's criticism, in *Being and Time*, of those who seek to persuade themselves that death is what happens to other people.[34] And he would agree with Heidegger's further point, reinforced by many psychologists and biologists in recent years, that anticipation of one's own death, far from being something to suppress, plays a central role in bringing home to a person a sense of his own individuality as a human being. One reason, arguably, why an animal lacks self-awareness is that it is without a sense that it will one day die. The rational person, therefore, will not ignore death but, so to speak, include it as part of his or her life. It is not what comes, like an Afterword, once the story is over, but is instead the conclusion of the story. In Heidegger's famous expression, as a being-in-the-world, a human being is also a 'being-towards-death'. What is required, then, is a proper understanding of death, from the right perspective, as an integral part of the whole of life.

It is the call to this type of understanding which, in effect, is Tagore's response to the existence of all those evils that might appear to contradict the existence of goodness and harmony. Consider the following important remark:

> a man, who by his profession, is concerned with any particular aspect of life is apt to magnify its proportions; in laying undue stress upon facts, he looses his hold upon truth. A detective may have the opportunity of studying crimes in detail, but he loses his sense of their relative place in the whole social economy.[35]

Our familiar and erroneous tendency, Tagore maintains, is to consider and evaluate evils in isolation from the wider context of life. If, for example, we keep the 'searchlight of our observation turned upon' death, he says, the world will appear to us like a 'huge charnel house'. But it will only appear this way if we fail to keep in view the wholeness of life of which death is part. Only when we isolate the fact of death, do we experience its blankness, become dismayed, and morbidly brood over it. The point is brought out by Tagore with the help of a useful analogy. A piece of cloth looks beautiful to us even though, were we to look at it through a microscope, we would find it full of ugly, jagged holes. These holes are indeed parts of the cloth, but they in no way spoil its beauty when the cloth is viewed from an appropriate standpoint. Only when they are unduly magnified do they interfere with enjoyment of the whole piece of material. As Rabindranath himself puts it:

> We lose sight of the wholeness of a life of which death is part. It is like looking at a piece of cloth through a microscope. It appears like a net, we gaze at the big holes and shiver in imagination. But the truth is, death is not the ultimate reality. It looks black as the sky looks blue; but it does not blacken existence, just as the sky does not leave its stain upon the wings of the bird.[36]

To appreciate the harmony and beauty of the world, then, it is not necessary to deny or ignore such evils as death. Rather we must nurture the capacity to regard the world as a whole, within which even these 'blemishes' have their place.

To regard the world in this way, we need to achieve what might be called the appropriate aesthetic distance from phenomena. If, to vary the cloth example, we stand very near to a tree, we will be aware only of the wrinkles on the bark of its trunk. But viewed from an appropriate distance the tree as a whole will look stately, balanced and beautiful. To maintain the appropriate aesthetic distance from such objects of nature is not, generally, something difficult. It is much more difficult to achieve this distance from the situations of life in which we are involved. In connection with these, we tend to be in the position of an actor who, preoccupied with his particular role, is unable to grasp the total structure and narrative of the play. Standing in the midst of life, with all its dramas, sorrows and sufferings, it is not easy to step back and to attain to a perspective on the whole. Tagore elaborates the point as follows:

> Since human beings are very near to us, we are always prone to magnify their limitations or smallness. Since we are in the human world very intimately, the terrible steam arising out of different conflicts and tumults of human life suffocates us. We attend only to poverty, disease, famine, different acts of barbarism, but not to the infinite harmony which is there by appropriating all the evils of life.[37]

Difficult as it may be to achieve appropriate aesthetic distance, it is something, Tagore firmly believed, that is possible with suitable training and preparation. We do have the capacity to view both nature and human world from this distance, to cultivate a frame of mind that enables us to discern a harmony that is beyond the surface discord. This conviction is expressed in a poem written after the premature death of his wife, where he solicits her help in developing just that distance and attitude of transcendence.

> Dark clouds have blotted all lights from above; and we caged birds cry
> And ask you: My friend, is it the death moment of creation? Has God
> Withdrawn his blessings from the sky?
> Times were when the sudden breath of April would waft the distant
> Fragrance of hope into our hearts, and the morning light would gild
> The iron bars of our prison with its golden spell and would bring the
> Gladness of the open world into our cage.
> But, see, it is all dark in the hills yonder, and not a thinnest rift has been

> Made by the scimitar of light cutting through the massive gloom.
> Our chains today sit heavy on our feet, and not a flush of glow is left in
> The sky with which to build an illusion of joy.
> But let not our fear and sorrow pain you, my friend!
> Come not to sit at the door of our cage to cry with us,
> Your wings are unfettered,
> Far away from us you soar beyond all clouds,
> And from there send us the message in song:
> 'The light is shining for ever. The lamp of the sun is not out'.[38]

That we can learn to see that 'the lamp of the sun is not out' in spite of the darkness of our life was Tagore's unwavering conviction, one that enabled him to take calmly the many sorrows and sufferings he experienced, including the tragic deaths of his wife, his sister-in-law, his daughters Madhrilata and Renuka, and his son Shamindranath.

What we have just been describing is the response to evils by, one might say, Tagore the poet. But there is a different kind of response he also makes – that of a man of action. For Tagore, as we have seen, a person's identity is partially constituted through praxis, through participation in the social sphere. Hence it is through action, as much as through aesthetic perspective, that a person should confront evil. This is made clear in the poem 'Romantic', where he writes that the real world with all its poverty, disease, and ugliness is one that calls upon him to respond with the 'weapon' of 'hard, uncompromising action'.[39] For the poet or artist who achieves appropriate aesthetic distance, harmony and beauty are discernible behind or beyond the jarring, ugly aspects of life. For the man of action, however, the immediate imperative is not one of aesthetic detachment from evils, but active involvement in confrontation with them. Harmony, for such a man, is not something *given*, but something to be achieved by combating these evils. What motivates him to fight against evil is faith in the ultimate triumph of good, the belief that what is good is achievable, and that, therefore, harmony may be established. He is confirmed in this belief by the recognition that everything in the world is forever changing and flowing forwards, so that evils are always and necessarily transitory. They pass on or pass by, or become, as it were, transmuted into good. As Tagore puts it:

> Could we collect the statistics of the immense amount of death and putrefaction happening every moment in this earth, they would appal us. But evil is ever moving; with all its incalculable immensity it does not effectively clog the current of our life; and we find that the earth, water, and air remain sweet and pure for living beings.[40]

Rabindranath uses a number of analogies to help familiarize us with the point he is making here. A river, for example, has banks that prevent it flowing in certain directions, but they are not simply obstacles: on the contrary, it is

the banks which make possible the onward flow of the river. Similarly a boat has its tow-rope which, while restraining its movement, also serves to draw the boat forwards. Again, the hard floor on which the child keeps falling when learning to walk is painful, but it is the very same floor that finally enables the child to walk ahead, and even the painful knocks it has received serve as an impetus to the goal of walking. Analogously, we meet with many obstacles and setbacks in our daily life: 'the unyielding sureness of reality' very often 'crosses our will', causing frustration and suffering. But these very obstacles enable us intelligently to direct our lives and move ahead, like the river. And just as those hard falls served to teach the child how to walk, so painful setbacks in life belong to our education as rational, self-directing beings.

A more telling analogy, perhaps, that Tagore employs to show that, finally, good emerges from evil is with the growth of science. Evil in everyday life, he writes, corresponds to 'error … in our intellectual life'.[41] If we look at the development of scientific thought, we find that it progresses through mistakes or errors. The history of science is in large part a catalogue of such errors, yet no one would conclude from this that science is the 'one perfect mode of disseminating mistakes'.[42] For what that history also displays is a progressive approximation to truth. As Karl Popper has persuasively argued, later theories possessing greater 'verisimilitude' emerge on the basis of 'falsifying' earlier ones.[43] In the same general way, human history is full of evil episodes, but it is nevertheless a story of progress and growth that tells of increasing approximation to goodness. Through struggling against poverty, disease and premature death – but also by combating selfishness or confinement to the 'narrow' self – men and women have succeeded, albeit slowly and with difficulty, in enabling greater harmony, in society and in their individual lives, than existed in past centuries.

Doubtless there will remain sceptics who reject this story of progress and maintain that evil and disharmony are always bound to be the prevailing features of life. For Tagore, in a striking metaphor, such scepticism or nihilism is 'a form of mental dipsomania' that 'disdains healthy nourishment, [and] indulges in the strong drink of denunciation'.[44] Indeed to brood in this way on the negative aspect of life is utterly morbid. Obviously, there are evils and sufferings in our life, but how can we ignore the fact that there are also 'law and order, beauty and joy, goodness and love'? For Rabindranath:

> Man does not believe in evils, just as he cannot believe that violin strings have been purposely made to create the exquisite torture of discordant notes, though by the aid of statistics it can be mathematically proved that the probability of discord is far greater than that of harmony, and for one who can play the violin, there are thousands who cannot. Yet the potentiality of perfection outweighs actual contradictions.[45]

Here Tagore is telling us not only what he believes to be the case but something that, for pragmatic reasons of mental or spiritual health it is good to believe. We are more likely to flourish as human beings if we develop the positive feeling that the potentiality of the good outweighs actual evils, that the direction of humanity is from evil to good. Pessimism is not only mistaken, it is a symptom of mental aberration:

> For we feel that the good is the positive element in man's nature, and in every age and every clime what he values most is his ideal of goodness. We have known the good, we have loved it, and we have paid our highest reverence to men who have shown in their lives what goodness is.[46]

Indeed, unless we maintain a positive faith in and reverence for good, we will be without the inspiration to consider evil as a challenge and to fight against it for the goal of harmony in human existence. Scepticism or nihilism, one might say, is a self-fulfilling prophecy, for by weakening our resolve to work towards harmony and goodness, it guarantees that these will never be attained.

Let us summarize the preceding discussion. The world – our life as a whole – is in essence beautiful or harmonious, despite features analogous to the jagged holes or the wrinkles of the cloth or tree. It requires, however, an appropriate aesthetic perspective in order to perceive this harmony. That perception, nevertheless, should not exclude the commitment of the man of action, of the person who works within society to combat and overcome the evils that assail it. This is a commitment that requires faith, the not unreasonable and surely healthy conviction that people are not condemned to selfishness but may succeed, as in fact they have progressively been doing over the centuries, in establishing harmony within and among themselves, and indeed with the whole universe in which they find themselves.

Notes

1 'Vichitra', song 27, *Gitabitan*, Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1997, p. 555.
2 *Thoughts from Rabindranath Tagore*, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, ed. Sisir Kumar Das, 3 vols, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy,1999, vol. 3, p. 40.
3 'Puja', song 582, *Gitabitan*, p. 229.
4 Quoted from Sashibhusan Das Gupta, *Upanishader Patabhumikay Rabindranath*, Calcutta: A. Mukherjee & Co., 1961, p. 4.
5 'Pantho', in *Parishesh*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 15 vols, Calcutta: West Bengal Government, 1961, vol. 2, p. 877.
6 'Ratri', in the book of poems, *Nabajatak*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, pp. 718–19.
7 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. J. Mayne, London: Phaidon, 1964, p. 27.
8 Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', trans. Catherine Porter, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: Pantheon, 1984, p. 46.

9 'Puja', song 75, *Gitabitan*, p. 36.
10 R. Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 322.
11 'Letter to Amiya Chakraborty', in *Sahityer Pathe* (in Bengali), Calcutta: Visva Bharati Publishing Department, 1968, p. 7.
12 'What is Art?', *Personality*, *The English Writings*, vol. 2, p. 353.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., p. 352.
15 Ibid., p. 354.
16 'Fact and Truth', *Sahityer Pathe*, p. 51.
17 *Sahitya*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 13, p. 781.
18 'What is Art?', *Personality*, pp. 349–62.
19 'Ebar Phirao More', in the poetical work *Chitra*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 1, pp. 472–4.
20 *Patraput*, poem 12, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, pp. 371–3.
21 I have collected all the above information and quotations from a recent work by a very eminent scholar of Rabindranath, Shankho Ghosh's, *Daminir Gan*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 2003, pp. 22–6.
22 R. Rorty, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 197.
23 Ibid.
24 References to Baudelaire are from Abu Sayeed Ayyub, *Modernity and Rabindranath* (in Bengali), Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1980, and *Tagore's Quest* (in English), Calcutta: Papyrus, 1980. Ayyub has tried to illuminate Tagore's quest for the good through contrasting him with Baudelaire, who saw only 'the tedious sight of immortal sin'.
25 *Kadi o Komal*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 1, p. 149.
26 *Chitra*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 1, p. 464.
27 *Kadi o Komal*, p. 195.
28 *Sonar Tari*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 1, pp. 448–9.
29 *Chitra*, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 1, pp. 472–3.
30 *The English Writings*, vol. 1, p. 190.
31 Ibid., p. 317.
32 Ibid., p. 178.
33 'The Second Birth', *Personality*, p. 380.
34 Martin Heideger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1960, sections 51–2.
35 'The Problem of Evil', *Sadhana*, *The English Writings*, vol. 2, p. 299.
36 Ibid.
37 *Shanti niketan* (in Bengali), *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 12, pp. 231, 231 and 235.
38 *Utsarga*, poem 31, translated by Tagore, *The English Writings*, vol. 1, p. 337.
39 *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 3, pp. 708–9.
40 'The problem of Evil', p. 298.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 See especially Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London: Hutchinson, 1959.
44 'The problem of Evil', p. 300.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid. In this context, one might note another simile Tagore uses in response to those who see only the dark aspect of life. 'If we find that some poet is describing the beautiful smile of a girl, we must appreciate that it is worth describing. But if, just after that, he tells us of a dentist who on examination finds caries in her teeth, then it is of course news, but not so urgent as to be communicated to all. If we find him passionately dwelling just on that, it is quite reasonable to doubt, there is caries also in his outlook' ('Adhunik Kavya' ('Modern Poetry'), *Sahityer Pathe*, p. 119).

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